Oleander

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Oleander

by squirmy

Summary

There's no choice in whether Will wants to cooperate in the M.C.P's jobs. It's required of him, it's his duty, and Will would have been lying if he said he got absolutely nothing out of it. What sort of life would he have if he wasn't in a facility? He couldn't pass as a normal person, not with his eyes, and he can't touch people without them dying.

It's better for him in here, where he can do something good with what he's been given.

(AU in which Will Graham is a government secret, Hannibal Lecter is a cannibalistic super-villain, and Jack Crawford's attempts to keep them from colliding seem to fail in any universe where they might coexist)

Notes

Seems like I'm a few years too late for the Hannibal fandom, but I'm just gonna ignore that and put all this up here, because why not let my first proper work be about what's essentially a cannibalistic superman?

This work was inspired by a lovely piece of art made by Reapersun, which I haven't been able to get out of my mind since I first saw it:
http://reapersun.tumblr.com/post/156366180217/support-me-on-patreon-reapersunpatreon-a

Chapter 1

Will is four the first time his father strikes him.

He is also four the first time he watches someone die.

Unsurprisingly, these two events happen only several seconds apart.

The trailer park had been dreary. There was little to do besides count the number of bugs splattered against the windowshield and try to wave at his neighbors from across the way. Unlike their last stop, there were no other children at the park who'd answer his greetings or come out to play; the most interaction he'd gotten had been from a senile looking man who'd smiled with three teeth and had had a yappy little dog who cried and cried whenever he saw Will. But he'd been in spots like those before, and had known how to remedy his boredom just fine.

Whether his father would have liked his way of doing so had never been something he'd ever cared to think about.

That became clear the second he'd thought to go tromping around in the lot outside. It had just rained, then, and it was the perfect opportunity to go splashing through puddles and making mud pies. There had been no one to keep him from putting on his shoes and his rain jacket two sizes too big; his father was always gone during the day to try and make a quick buck wherever he could, and gone at night when he spent what little he had at whatever bar was closest to the park. None of the neighbors would have thought to tell him no. It wasn't their place to do so, and none of them could have known the consequences.

Before dusk, Will had finally dragged himself back into their trailer, his shoes trailing dirt along the steps and into the cabin. He'd shucked them off without much care and flopped down on his springy little cot, wet and dog tired.

That's where Will's memory got away from him. He's tried to convince himself it's his own mind trying to save him, repressing the moment down in the dark recesses of his psyche. Now, he understands that it's because his father's memories are that much stronger, and that Will, young and malleable, had absorbed it all as his own.

He knows his father was angry about the mud, that he was drunk, that he'd been halfway ready to kill Will. He knows that his father had pulled him out of bed by the hair, had watched his writhing, struggling body, and found pleasure from his pathetic cries. His father had screamed and slurred, and he'd raised that hand to give Will *exactly what he deserved-*

And then Will's father died.

There's a slight fuzziness, the remembrance of a dead weight falling on him, of being trapped beneath a cooling body. There'd been tears, and cries for help which were answered with police sirens and an officer who'd had kind eyes *(and a family, two daughters and a baby on*

the way, who he was sure was gonna be a boy and who he was going to name Anthony) who reached out to touch him too.

Understandably, after that, the rest of the authorities had panicked and tried to call for an ambulance. They called in a body on the scene, an officer down, and a kid.

Two paramedics tried to coax him out from beneath the trailer. One gripped his shirt. The other grabbed his arm.

It took three bodies (and a kid) for the black vans to come.

The rest is unimportant. Will doesn't care to try and recall any of it, knowing that anything he could piece together would be far from the truth. Memories are funny in that way, always made a mess by emotions and feelings at the time, or marred by the ones in the present. The mind is an unreliable narrator. Will guesses that's why he stands on such shaky ground.

"Shaky ground?" Dr. Chilton echoes, one brow cocked. His pen taps lightly against the pad of paper on his thigh. "You think you're unstable?"

"You and I already know I am." Will responds flatly. "You wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

"Seeing a psychiatrist doesn't necessarily mean that you're unstable, Will. Many people have them, regardless of stability. Mental or otherwise."

He snorts. "You're acting like this is voluntary. You're paid to see me, and I'm forced to see you. I'm not benefitting from these visits. You are."

"Therapy doesn't work if you don't want it to." Dr. Chilton says, unruffled.

"Then I don't want it to."

That gains a frown from Dr. Chilton, and likely all others watching from behind the glass to his right. He sets his pen down, looks at Will, trying to reach his eyes. Will's rather glad that they'd glazed over with time and use of his powers, the cornea and pupil gone to leave a blank sheet of white behind. No one's able to see where he's looking if he's not tilting his head with his gaze. No one can correct him, tell him it's rude, tell him to look at them.

"Why don't you tell me about what happened with your last case?" Dr. Chilton redirects the conversation a moment later. "I've been told you found it very upsetting."

Will tips his head back, staring up at the white panels on the ceiling, the florescent lights. He thinks of the sun and rushing water. He thinks of spring. "I didn't find it upsetting. It was just...overwhelming."

"Overwhelming?"

"Yes."

"How did you find it overwhelming?"

Dr. Frederick Chilton fakes sincerity, but his interest is genuine. He's curious, fascinated with Will's abilities. He doesn't need to read his emotions to see that. It's written all over his face, the way he clicks his pen again, prepared to start scribbling down Will's answer, his observations of his 'patient'.

(Briefly, he wonders what it might look like if Chilton were in those waters. What it might be like to hold him down there, to feel his heartbeat beneath his palm)

"It took him longer to die. It's always instant- they don't know that they're dying. They can't feel it. It just happens. But he..." Will takes a breath. "He felt it. He understood. He was scared. He was in pain."

Dr. Chilton's head tilts just slightly. There's a single click from his pen. "Did you feel sympathy for him?"

"I'm an empath, Frederick."

"Let me rephrase: did you feel guilt?"

Will blinks, weighing the question in his mind. "Yes."

It's the correct answer. Dr. Chilton eases. "The brain is wired to feel some amount of empathetic pain. It's only natural that you feel it stronger than most."

Dr. Chilton drones on about something to do with everyone being empaths in their own right. Will thinks back to spring. The waves lap at his brow, the sound of rushing water drowning out the rest of the world. Will stares passively ahead, nodding at certain points, talking without thinking. He knows what Chilton wants to hear and what will make the appointment go faster.

Adam Brown waits for him in his thoughts. He was young, and had looked even younger when he was scared. Granted, he'd had the right to be; government agents had come for him, accusing him of crimes he didn't commit, and stuffed him in the back of a car. Adam hadn't known then what it was for, but Will had the unfortunate experience in all of it.

The Meta-Human Containment Program kept tabs on anyone who they thought had potential powers, tracking blood work and hospital records to try and filter through who had the right gene and who didn't. Some were born into their powers, some gained them. Will for example: his own had blossomed through "extreme stress". He was lucky to get taken in as a toy rather than be taken out as a threat. Adam Brown had been unfortunate enough to be considered a danger to national security. His power had been fluctuating as of late, and with the likelihood that he'd lose control, the M.C.P simply couldn't risk it.

A walking nuclear power plant. That was what Jack had called him. It wasn't far off- his ability to absorb and release radiation was one that Will couldn't help but admire. He'd almost melted through the cuffs by the time Will had gotten to that white-walled room.

I don't understand, he'd sobbed. *I don't understand. Please let me go.*

Will feels sick thinking about it.

He's not sure if it's for the right reasons.

Dr. Chilton brushes something off of his suit as he stands. Will tries to catch a glimpse of what he has written down on the paper, but it's turned and pressed against his side. "I think we'll have you out of this slump soon, Will." He says, offering a quick upturn of his lips that's not quite a smile. "Then you'll be good as new. I'll see you next week?" It's posed as a question, like Will has the choice of changing the date somehow. He nods anyway, watching Dr. Chilton leave the room. Guards come in right after him, gloved and armored, not an inch of skin in sight. Will's only just begun to wonder what they might look like.

It's routine from there. The guards bring him back down halls and through locked doors, pressing in the code for his quarters and allowing him to walk inside on his own. The room seems smaller when the door's closed; it's larger than an actual cell, at least, with painted blue walls and a nice, polished wood floor. A twin sized bed is pressed the right wall, a TV mounted on the left, a few trinkets and tokens scattered around. Will looks over it all with neutrality. He feels no hate for the room, nor love of it. It's just a room or, at the very least, a nicely dressed cell.

This has been his room for the past thirty odd years. It was thought he'd need some form of stability when he'd first brought in; so much had already changed both around him and in him, and making him comfortable, while not a priority, had been the least that they could do. Sometimes, Will finds himself grateful. Other times, he doesn't quite care.

It's one of the 'other times'. He goes to sit at the edge of his bed, turning on the TV and flicking through the channels. He isn't allowed access to the outside world if it isn't planned and supervised, but he's at least allowed to look at it. It's a kindness that's cruel; being able to see, but not touch. It's a terrible metaphor for his predicament.

The news shows nothing of importance or promise, but he puts it on as background noise anyways. The chatter of the anchors is better than listening to the howling of his own thoughts. He shucks off his (laceless) shoes and lays on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. His fingers fiddle with one another, making circles in the opposite palm, his thumbs pressing against the bone of either wrist.

He's been seeing Dr. Chilton for a year now. Apparently, being wheeled around to pry information out of war criminals and meta-humans while also 'humanely' executing people for several years isn't very good for one's mental health. Alana Bloom, one of his main caretakers, had been adamant that he be allowed to talk to someone, and so Frederick Chilton had been brought to the scene.

The man doesn't have much grace to him despite being an expert in his field; his questions never lead anywhere, and any analysis he's gotten of Will is probably bullshit. But it makes Alana happy to see even faked progress, and so he cooperates.

There's no choice in whether he wants to cooperate in M.C.P's jobs. It's required of him, it's his duty, and Will would have been lying if he said he got absolutely nothing out of it. What sort of life would he have if he wasn't in a facility? He couldn't pass as a normal person, not

with his eyes, and he can't touch people without them dying. It's better for him in here, where he can do something *good* with what he's been given.

Will clasps his hands together, fingers intertwined, and breathes.

An hour passes before it’s time for his less professional check up to begin. Alana is always there sometime after his appointments with Chilton. He would have liked her to be his therapist rather than him, but she's too involved to be considered a neutral party.

"You okay?" Alana asks the moment she's in his room, the door closed behind her. She's wearing long sleeves and pants, but he can see her hands, her neck and face exposed. "Tell me the truth."

He sits up, hands sliding beneath his thighs. "I told Chilton-"

"You told him what he wanted to hear."

Will stares at the floor. Alana seems to take this as some kind of defeat, sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose, looking at him like he's some poor, kicked puppy. "Look. I know that you don't like him. I don't like him either. But neither of us have to like him for this to work. Just- pretend that he's a wall. Talk at that wall. And if the wall actually says something important or helpful, then listen."

"You make it sound like it's easy. He tries to...pry me open, see what's inside me. He doesn't want to understand me so he can help me. He wants to understand me so that he can go and say he worked Empath's case. It's for his reputation, for recognition."

"Everything anyone does is for recognition. And don't tell me you're going to actually start calling yourself that."

"Call myself what?"

"Empath."

Will shrugs. "It's what I am."

"That’s your ability. That doesn't mean people should turn it into some codename for you.” She says. “And it demeans you. Makes you seem less...." Alana's face contorts, discomfort in her tone. "Human."

"Technically, I'm not."

"Human, meta-human, it doesn't matter. You're still a person."

His noncommittal grunt seems to worry her, bringing their conversation to a sudden halt. She looks at him, and he looks at the wall, feeling her concern and fear. It doesn't crash into him like a tidal wave, just lapping at his toes.

It reaches his ankles as she inches closer, seeming to try and find the right words to say. "...I bought you new gloves," Alana says instead. "I couldn't get them in with me today. Security's

tight right now, but Zeller is on shift tomorrow, so he'll let it through." Another pause. "I'll try to talk to Jack again about Chilton."

It's not a promise, not really, but it's the best that she can give when it comes to dealing with the director of the program. Will lifts his head, offering a twitching smile. "I can deal with Chilton. Besides, I doubt you'll get anything through with him. It's too much of a security risk, having two people who've worked closely with me."

"Jack cares about you- no, don't make that face, he *does*. He pushes, but he brought in Chilton to help. If he sees that he's not, then he'll find someone else."

"Who else is going to work with me?" Will counters, brows drawing together. "Being put in a room with someone who can kill with just a touch isn't very appealing to most people."

It takes him a moment to realize that that is exactly their situation.

He presses on, "I told you, I can deal with him. I'll do what you told me to. Talk to the wall, ignore the bullshit it spews, and take what rare bricks of wisdom it might drop on me."

Alana smiles at him, genuine this time. She tucks a lock of brown hair behind her ear. Will shuffles around, hands twitching under his thighs.

His slumped shoulders tense as she moves, coming to sit beside him on the bed. It's not the first time she's come close, of course- she's not afraid, even though she should be. Alana wants to make a connection somehow, reaching out every instance that she can. There's a curiosity in her, an emotion that's slinking along the surface, but Will can't quite pick at what it is. It's sincere, though, and something that he can cling to and leech off of as much as she will allow.

And he does. God, he does. His abilities are parasitic in nature. *He's* parasitic in nature. Will is selfish, and is sure that someday (the day he untucks his hands because he's too comfortable around her) he will regret not pushing her away. But for now, he will take from her in small incriments. What she is left with in the end- it's not something he wants to think about.

"You can talk to me. You know that, right?" She tilts her head, trying to meet his eyes. She's learned how to read where his gaze is at, even if she can't see it. "It can be about anything. It's just between you and me."

And the security cameras, Will doesn't say, biting hard on his tongue. Instead, he says, "I know."

"I can't be your therapist, but I can still be your friend, Will." Alana reaches out, placing a hand on his covered knee and offering a gentle squeeze.

He has the sudden, blinding urge to scream. Will doesn't, though, because that's not the right reaction to affection, and so he tries to smile.

Alana leaves, eventually. He sleeps, eventually. Morning comes. Eventually.

Zeller is on duty, as expected. He brings in Will's tray of food, offers a warm "good morning", and isn't fazed when Will doesn't respond. He strays from routine, though, leaving a small box right on the dresser before making his way out. Inside lay a pair of gloves, leather and new, that he slides on. It doesn't exactly stop his ability, but it covers it, at least. Stuffing his hands in his pockets isn't the safest solution, and the gloves aren't a permanent one either, but they're better than nothing.

Breakfast is the same as it's always been. A hashbrown, some scrambled eggs, and two strips of bacon. What is brought in to drink can vary. Sometimes it's orange juice, sometimes it's water, and a few times it's coffee. Will doesn't know what causes the change, but he appreciates the small sprinkle of surprise in his morning.

Faceless guards come in fifteen minutes after he's finished his meal, as they always do. They say nothing. They don't touch him. They don't have to. He already knows to follow, arms hanging at either side to let them know where his hands are.

(They're so focused on his hands, all the time; every inch of his skin is just as deadly, but it's only the hands that they've confined in the past)

The halls are white. Everything is white. Or mostly white, the floors and corners varying in different, lighter shades of gray. His jumpsuit fits with it, a pale blue that could meld into the walls if there was enough shine from the florescent lights. Will can't help but wonder who decided on the color, and if they'd ever considered making it orange, just to fuck with him.

The jumpsuit stands out completely in Jack's office. It's dark, rich reds and blacks painting the walls and the few pieces of furniture around. Jack wears dark suits and ties as well, has dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes. It makes Will feel like an alien or an intruder. He's come to the conclusion that that is exactly what he is.

The guards leave his side to stand by the door. They look stiff, but he can't feel any real worry. He's been in the facility without a single accident for nearly his whole life. It's easy to think that, if he hasn't lashed out by now, he won't lash out at all.

"Will," Jack says as a greeting, then gestures to the chair in front of his desk. "Take a seat."

Will prefers to stand. He likes to pace around, if only so that his thoughts don't have time to catch up with him. Staying seated and still feels trapping, almost. But Jack hadn't posed it as a suggestion, and Will knows better than to pretend he had. He sits.

"How are you?" Jack folds his hands on top of the table, gaze set on Will. "Chilton told me-"

"I know what he said." Will interjects. "I know what *I* said. I just…said, I was unstable. Not constantly, only in that moment. I'm fine now."

Jack doesn't seemed fazed by the interruption, but his brow does raise considerably at the reassurances. "Really?"

Will nods. "Yes. Fine."

Jack stares at him a while longer. His eyes narrow slightly, seeming to take Will in, flicking over his wild, curled hair and pale skin, searching the white of his eyes. Whatever he sees, he approves, and sits back. That's simply how it goes. Even if Will is not-quite-good, Jack continues on as if he's right as rain. He can't afford to lose Will and his 'services', especially not when their branch of government is already being questioned for it's usefulness.

"Good." Jack says. He moves on from there, pulling a manilla folder out from his desk, presenting it on the table. With careful hands, Will opens it, laying papers out, one after the other. Three men and two women, all of them varying ages and races. Will glances over them all blankly as Jack goes on. "We've got a couple meta-humans on our radar right now. Most of them haven't shown any signs of activity, but we're keeping an eye on them. The one to the right- Mat Small- is our main concern right now."

"Not the Ripper?" Will asks casually, flipping through papers. When he looks up, Jack's face has become hardened stone. A wall blocks the way to his emotions. It's not impenetrable, of course. With a bit of force, Will could break past it with ease. He doesn't, though, merely watches from the other side.

A few seconds pass before either moves. Jack sits up taller, re-folding his hands. "No. Not the Ripper."

"He hasn't had any new incidents, then?"

"You should focus more on our current cases, Will."

Will flips to another file. "I'm just trying to prepare for future ones." His eyes flick back down to the profiles in front of him.

The Ripper is not a topic of discussion, or at least not one that is held for very long. It's not because Jack if afraid of the Ripper- he is afraid of the conversation itself. He's afraid of where that trail of thought might lead Will, of how even attempting to be in such a mind might affect him.

Will's never bothered much to think about it. He knows about a crumb's worth when it comes to the Ripper, and the only thing he's seen from him is the carnage left behind.

For Jack's sake, he drops it, and looks over the profiles properly. He doesn't try to familiarize himself with the names or faces; if Will ever meets any of them, he'll know exactly who they are once he's done.

"So," Will says looking over Mat Small's folder, "Shapeshifter?"

Jack let's out an affirmative grunt. Will can practically taste his relief. "Damn good one as well. You remember the last one we tracked down?" He asks.

Will nods. "Patrick Ferris. He could only mimic features, not voices."

"This one's better. A *lot* better. Looks, speech patterns, fingerprints- he's got everything down to a T."

Will doesn't miss a beat. "When's he coming in?" It's the first thing he always asks. Cases like these have agents swarming on them in an instant, so it comes as a surprise when Jack doesn't immediately answer. Will brings his hands away from the sheets, head tilted just slightly. "You *do* have him in custody, don't you?"

Jack stares at him for a minute, resettling his hands again. It's all Will can do from trying to push back at that wall he's set up in the time that he's silent. "Because of his…abilities, it's been deemed too dangerous for him to enter any government building, especially with the chance that he might swap places and possibly uncover 'delicate' information if the processing goes wrong." He explains. "That's why I'm calling for an outside operation." At Will's blank look, he continues with, "You, going out with a few of our operatives in the field."

To his credit, Will doesn't burst out with an immediate *"No."* Still, sitting and staring at Jack unblinklingly is hardly better.

He does manage to say something, eventually, the kind of something he knows that Jack won't want to hear: "What does Alana think about this?"

Jack offers a strained kind of smile. "I'm sure she'll understand."

Alana, of course, does *not* understand.

She comes into the office relatively calm, and only starts putting up a fight the second Jack is done laying out his plan, and continues to fight as he tries to explain himself and said plan over again. Her points are as venomous as they are valid: Will isn't in the right state of mind for something like this, there's too much of a possibility that they might be exposed, and Will's first proper introduction into the outside world shouldn't be in this way.

No one asks him what Will thinks of it. He doesn't bother to try and put it out there, either; for his own sake, Will forgets the fact that he is entitled to an opinion at all.

He sits passively as Alana leans over Jack's desk, her palm flat against the wood, the muscles in her jaw jumping as she speaks. "You can't really think this is a good idea." She says, exasperated already.

"It's a test run."

"A *test run?"* Alana's tone pitches upwards in disbelief. "Are you *serious?* You don't "test run" human beings, especially not when they're still trying to heal. I'm not going to buy into it, and neither is Frederick."

"Actually, he has. Dr. Chilton thinks it'll be good for Will, getting fresh air. Maybe even a different perspective." Jack says. Will admires the way he's able to convince himself that Frederick cares for his mental health in any capacity. He looks to Alana, then, her distress eating away at his brain as she stares, mouth opened just slightly. "Are you saying that you don't want Will to start interacting outside the building?"

Alana's teeth grind into one another, words hissing out beyond them. "No, I'm not. I don't want him stuck in here for the rest of his life, but I don't want to throw him out into the fray like this, and I don't want to treat him like he's not a person."

(Will decides not to point out the fact that talking about someone like they're not in the room makes them seem less like a person, if only to be polite)

"You're making a mistake. The kind of mistake you can't just sweep right under the rug. The kind that someone's going to notice."

Jack, who has remained in his seat for nearly the entire time, finally leans forwards. "Or, it could be the operation that gets a good notice. My higher ups have been at me questioning exactly what it is we do here and what kind of purpose we serve, Dr. Bloom. We need to show them what he can do."

The underlying threat of what might happen if they are unable to do so is unsaid, but it makes Alana pale either way. Her fear is not for herself- it is for Will. It's a warranted kind of concern, of course. Will's not stupid enough to think they'll find much value in him if the M.C.P is shut down, and even if they do, it will only be as a science experiment.

It's a smart move on Jack's part. She quiets, stands tall, but backs off all the same. Alana's sentiment overrides her logic at the worst of times.

Finally, Will decides to speak, looking at the thin line of Alana's mouth. "I'll be fine," he lies, because it's what she needs to hear. She doesn't look to him even as he speaks, only at Jack, who gestures to Will with a smile. He is encouraging this, but there is no other choice, or at least not one that would have a very happy ending for him (not that there is a happy ending anywhere in his future, but maybe a more ideal path).

"See?" Jack says, reeling his hand back in. "He said it himself. He'll be fine. If that doesn't ease your conscious, I don't know what will."

It doesn't ease her conscious. Actually, it looks as though her conscious has been made uneasier if the wrinkle in her brow and the set of her jaw is anything to go by. Her gaze breaks away from Jack, finally falling onto Will. "You're sure?" She asks, searching his milky eyes.

Will has an entire closet full of masks. They're halved and broken, chipped paint covering the floor of the storage, but they work just fine for him. He picks out the sane man and lifts it to his face, speaking through the half smile of reassurance it offers. "I'm sure."

That, apparently, is all the confirmation anyone needs for Will to be shipped off a week later.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The silence gives him time to consider a few things, specifically in this order:

What he'd been told throughout the week, just as they'd begun to gather and prepared to dispatch their group, how Chilton would be eager to hear of his experience outside, and of any possible traumas brought on by it, and how this mission is going to go horribly wrong.

Chapter Notes

First off, Oh. My. God.

Thank you so much to Reapersun, who was so lovely and kind enough to promote this fic and get it off the ground. Thank you to everyone who's read, bookmarked, left kudos, and commented (and oh my GOD the comments, y'all are so so so sweet and I'm just a giant sap when I read them). I didn't think I'd get such a positive response like this for my first fic, especially not when it's just the first chapter! Just. Thank you, so much. I'm putting my heart into this for all of y'all.

But enough of that teeth rotting stuff for now. More important note: I'll be trying to update this fic every two weeks, possibly weekly if I get it done quickly. If you want to know how a chapter's going or when one is going up, I'll be putting updates on my tumblr, http://cosmicmilk.tumblr.com/

Also in this chapter, I'm incorporating a new character or two, one of them being Miggs, who I'm using pretty liberally here. He is more or less sane and doesn't throw semen at people. He's just an asshole.

Besides the few years where he'd been hopping from trailer parks and motel rooms, Will has only been outside three times in his adult life. The first was, technically, only a about a minute long; he'd been brought out just to be stuffed in the back of an armored truck, ready to be transported right along to another building for an evaluation by Jack's peers and higher ups.

The second hadn't been for much longer than the first; a supervised little trip just outside the main building that had only been brought on because of Alana's insistence that he needed fresh air.

The third had been the only one he'd actually enjoyed. It was the same reason for the second, but with four-legged visitors that had happily licked at the seams of his leather gloves.

This fourth visit outside has no dogs. It doesn't have Alana, the comfort of knowing the facility was just behind him, or even the familiarity of his jumpsuit.

What it does have is a constricting new suit, a bumpy truck ride, and cuffs around his wrists. He knows that they weren't ordered by Jack, so Will assumes that it's the field agents that have requested he be restrained. He doesn't mind it. It's understandable. It makes them less likely to want to start a conversation, at least, when he looks something like a prisoner.

It's quiet for a while. He sits on a bench, one agent beside him, another across from him. Both seem preoccupied for the moment.

The silence gives him time to consider a few things, specifically in this order:

What he'd been told throughout the week, just as they'd begun to gather and prepared to dispatch their group, how Chilton would be eager to hear of his experience outside, and of any possible traumas brought on by it, and how this mission is going to go horribly wrong.

He certainly isn't hoping or wishing for it to end badly. But bringing him outside with a group he doesn't know, with a meta-human who can take any form he likes—it's a recipe for disaster. Will won't bother in 'I Told You So's when it does go wrong, both because no one will want to hear them, and because he is sure that Alana will beat him to the punch.

She'd been there at his send off, arms crossed tightly over her chest (an action which unintentionally acted as a dam for her worry, the waves only managing to offer sprinkles and a few fat drops as he'd been brought out for transport). He'd shot her a smile that she didn't return. Will had run his gaze over the creases in her brow before the doors had slammed shut and he'd been pushed into his seat.

He knows that at this point she's probably gone to pacing around outside. Or inside. Maybe she's gone right back to Jack's office to insult his poor planning, now that she can imagine more clearly the consequences of all their actions. It's a picture that's amusing enough for him to let out a soft huff of a laugh, smiling down at his hands.

"Something funny?" The agent across from his asks.

"No," Will says, his mouth falling into a flat, neutral line.

There's a soft murmur of *"freaky fuck",* but Will pays it no mind. He's heard worse, and the agent's opinion matters little to him. The agent to his left seems to believe he took the insult; her soft nudge startles Will, his head snapping to the side to see her smiling at him. "Miggs' an ass, don't pay attention to him." She says.

"Heard that, Katz." Miggs shoots back (if Will were a poetic type, he would have described his expression as a snarl).

Will's brows furrow. "I wasn't."

It's quiet, then, and he thinks that maybe she's been put off by him- there's some discomfort there in the air, but it's fleeting, leaving as soon as she scoots just an inch closer to him on the bench. "So, you're Empath. *The* Empath." Agent Katz eyes are alight, her gaze flicking over him. "You're like an urban legend outside, you know that? The stories get a little out of hand sometimes, but I did kind of believe some. I actually had bets that there'd be more physical mutations than just the eyes."

When Will opens his mouth to speak, he chokes on her curiosity. "Sorry." He's not sorry, and doesn't sound sorry, but Agent Katz doesn't seem to care either way.

"It's fine," Katz dismisses with a wave of her hand. "I don't mind. They can take my money- the only thing they'll ever know about you are stories. I'll be the only who actually got to meet you. That's worth more than a few bucks."

It's supposed to be a compliment. It *is* a compliment, and Will knows that. Katz is seeking a connection here, somehow. Will doesn't know if it's so she can try to get information she can dangle in front of her friends, or to try and make their short time together less impersonal. Maybe it's an odd mix of both. Emotions and motivations are never as straight forward as he would've liked them to be.

"The stories are probably more exciting," Will says. "I'm not interesting unless you like psychological theory."

Katz looks at him like he's just grown two heads (Will debates with himself for a second about whether he should check if he had, what with the talk of mutations). "Are you kidding? You're *fascinating.* You're basically ground zero when it comes to the government's knowledge on meta-humans. I'm pretty sure you're the only one they've taken in and put to use like this, you know. You're paving the way for future super agents."

Will shifts uncomfortably in his seat, his fingers starting to play with one another. "Probably not a good idea."

"What?"

"Meta-human agents." Will says. "It's not a good idea. I don't think they'd ever get volunteers for it, if they set something up. Or they wouldn't try taking volunteers at all." A slight tilt of his head, and Katz's eyes slide down to the magnetic cuffs holding his wrists together.

She frowns, seeming to prepare an apology in her head when Miggs lets out a scoff. "Rather see your kind of coffins than cuffs."

*"*Miggs." Katz warns.

Miggs ignores her, leaning forwards, his elbows on his knees. His black, almost beetle-like eyes bore into him, a smile curling on his lips to reveal yellowed teeth. "You better watch out. Once you're all gone, they're gonna want to take out all the trash. Won't be a quick ride for you-."

"Miggs." Katz is quick to snap.

The curiosity has leaked out of her, anger and annoyance written in the way she sits up, eyes narrowing at the other agent. That is all it takes to get Miggs to back down. He slumps back in his seat, arms crossed tightly over his chest; if Will actually listened, he'd probably be able to hear his mumbling. Katz occupies his ears, though, leaning in towards him. "Like I said. He's an asshole."

He lets out a soft hum of response. She can take it as she wants, as agreement or acknowledgment, he doesn't really mind either way.

Miggs' hypothetical situation is an unrealistic one. There's no possible way that the M.C.P would ever be able to get rid of every meta-human, and even if they did, more would be born at some point, either by a dormant mutate gene in a parent or simply having the affliction by chance. The more realistic situation is that Will will lose his usefulness.

He's considered the ways it might happen. He might be considered a hazard himself, the M.C.P would maybe lose its support and funding, or they'd possibly drain the power out of him by using his abilities too often. There's more tumbling around in his head, a thousand and one scenarios he's imagined. When there's nothing to do, Will finds himself playing them over and over again in his head, if only to pass the time.

It's not as dark as it sounds- it helps to keep him anchored, being so painfully aware of the situation. Besides, a bit of nihilism here and there never hurt anyone.

"You ready?" Katz asks a moment later. "I'm assuming you read the profile." She pauses, still looking at him, like she's waiting to see something that isn't there. "It says he has a family."

Will refrains from telling her that he knows that, and that he'd been studying the file for a while just out of boredom instead of preparation (there's no real need to look them over, not when he gets to know them better with a touch than through paper).

She's trying to pull vulnerability out of him. Once again, the reason isn't very clear, though Will can make his guesses. It's probably for another story to take back, of how she can describe him as some poor soul trapped in his place. More importantly, she'll be able to see him as a real human being with emotions that are, in fact, his own, and not the biproduct of anyone else in his general area.

"They won't get hurt." He says, instead of everything in his head.

"That doesn't really give an answer to my question."

"I'm as ready as I can be."

"That's really not comforting."

Will looks at her, brow furrowing. "It wasn't supposed to be comforting."

Katz's urge to spark conversation dies there, apparently, leaving the truck silent again. Will closes his eyes, twiddling his thumbs. When he tries hard enough, it's easy to think of the bumps from the road as the sway of the ocean.

He is allowed his fantasy for an hour more before they come to a stop. The doors open, Miggs hopping out first; Katz has the decency to help him up and off their transport (not by touching him, of course, but by keeping a hovering presence at his side).

It takes Will's eyes a moment to actually adjust, but once they do, he can't help but stare. They've been dropped somewhere just outside a neighborhood, along a road that's empty. But he's not focused on what man has made. His attention is to the trees.

They're not green and lush, like he'd wanted, like he'd hoped. Spring is what looks most beautiful on a screen, representing life and growth, offering a sense of hope and stability.

But *this.* The leaves have fallen at the edges of the road, settled at the trunks of trees, fanning the forest beyond with a carpet of reds and oranges and yellows. Small, soothing flames hang from the thick, twisted branches above, swaying on brittle stems, ready to fall but not burn out. Will turns his face to the sun for a moment, (just a moment) and feels the tickle of warmth on his cheeks. His lips part, like petals unfurling at first bloom, and breathes in the crisp air of autumn.

The way Miggs grabs at his wrists and unlocks his cuffs reminds Will that there is no time to savor this miracle.

The agent that's come to the meeting point doesn't offer a greeting, instead pressing at his ear and nodding to whoever is on the other line. "We've got visuals on the house, just to make sure he stays put." He steps aside, gesturing to the parked car Will assumes he came in. "Back up is there if you need it."

"Hopefully we won't need it." Katz says, and smiles. She doesn't wait for it to be returned, probably because she knows it won't be, instead heading to the car. Miggs follows, and Will stands there and realizes then that he hasn't been briefed exactly on their transport. He'd assumed it would just be on the truck, but driving a heavily armored vehicle into a nice little neighborhood is just asking for attention.

But still. Will prefers the car over the truck. He makes his way over in a slight huff, sitting down in the backseat. The seats are much more comfortable than the metal bench, and it's nice to sit without his hands being restrained.

Katz turns back to him, tossing a pair of sunglasses his way. "You two just let me handle this, okay?" She says, looking to them both pointedly. Miggs crosses his arms over his chest and looks out the window, Will giving a slight nod of acknowledgement as he looks out to the woods. The world's a shade darker with the glasses on, but it's best way to hide his eyes without looking so completely obvious.

They drive up through the street, passing quaint little house after quaint little house. Katz pulls to a stop in a driveway, finally, and they all seem to take a moment to look at the home before getting out.

Their approach is more casual, Katz and Miggs looking calm, even knowing what they know.

If anyone sees them, they won't remember. If they do, they will be forced to forget.

He has been briefed on how this will go a thousand times over. They will go to the door. They will knock. Matt Small, or a family member, will answer, and they will say they explain through lies who they are, and that they need to take a look around. They will corner Matt Small to talk. He will have a sudden heart attack.

Except he won't.

Whatever happens to the family after that is none of his business. Will is sure that Jack can do something for them, both to console and to keep quiet. No one needs to know about their operations, so it will all look like an unfortunate little accident. People died all the time—Mat Small will be as insignificant as the others.

The tension in Katz eases as she puts on a casual front, looking back to Miggs. "Don't say anything, alright? I've got it handled." She says, offering only a slight glare before turning her attention to Will. She says nothing to him, not really, but he gets the message anyways. It's the same as it is to Miggs; don't say anything, don't do anything, let her take the lead. Will is very happy to do so.

He'd told Alana once during the week that he thought something might not work out as planned. She'd frowned, taken his anxieties as fear, and assured him that everything would be fine. Their team was efficient and everything would be cleaned up just fine, that this was probably just some misdirected worry about being outside.

As they strode forwards towards the house, Will had a small moment of idiocy where he thought that maybe, just possibly, she might well be right about everything.

It ends as the door is flung open.

(Will feels just a bit dumber for never thinking the problems would start outside)

A gargle comes out of Mrs. Small's mouth as she chokes, blood bubbling in her mouth and puddling on their front steps. Only when she falls does anyone actually start moving; Katz and Miggs rush forwards, pressing their palms down against her throat. Rust covers their hands and the front of her shirt (and it's green, the shirt is green, and all Will can think is *spring,* life beneath blood).

Her eyes zip around between them all, her skin a ghostly white. It feels like they make eye contact for a moment as Will hovers above her, and he swears he sees a spark of clarity somewhere beneath the panic before they dull again.

His feet kick down the door and rush him inside, his body on autopilot, thinking only of what now is called for in the situation. There is no change in the plan, in his mind; he has come here with a purpose, and any way this goes, Matt Small will die. Will has done this before, many times, and he will do it again.

Except this isn't a ritual. It isn't routine. Will's body, a traitorous thing, recognizes that in an instant. His hands shake, limbs trembling as they lead him down a hall. It isn't white—it's brown, chestnut. The air isn't recycled—it's stuffy and hot, the copper tang of blood hitting the tip of his tongue and assaulting his nose.

It's not the same.

It doesn't matter.

The sound of whimpers leads him forwards. Matt Small is leading him on, closer and closer with his next victim as bait.

The first thing Will sees are his hands. One is clenched around a knife; the other holds onto a girl, the knuckles white as she struggles and writhes, screaming and crying, as if that would stop steel from slicing her flesh. His body nearly envelopes hers, pressed into her neck.

It takes Will a second to see what shadows hide in his face. Or what could have been a face—it's morphing, looking as though some dark, horrid thing is crawling beneath his skin.

"Matt Small," Will hears himself say, moving forwards still, because all he needs to do is touch, that's it, then it's over, all of it—

"Didn't even get the name, did you?" Matt Small snaps, his own voice high pitched in panic. "You found me, but you didn't even get the name! But that's fine, right?" He looks up, and beyond the fear, Will sees something manic and animalistic. "You don't need the name. You don't." He shakes his head. The blade presses into the girl's throat, drawing a trickle of blood.

The erratic twitching of his features pauses for a moment. Matt Small's eyes bore into his own, and he smiles. Will has to stop, once he realizes that his lips are beginning to sag right off his face.

His scalp splits in two, the slice that runs down his flesh bloodless and clean. He sheds himself of what is old, allows it to fall off of him like heavy silk, draping across the girl and onto the floor with a wet thump. The skin withers and dies there, wrinkled and cracked.

Will doesn't pay attention to how the girl shrieks as her father's face droops like some wax mask across her shoulder.

He's too busy staring at himself.

There is a sickly sheen to his face, suit, and hair. Even the sunglasses look slightly wet, shining in the kitchens light, like he's been drenched inside of a dry house (reborn, maybe, given life in this kitchen). Will is frantic, readjusting his grip on the knife over and over again in his new hands. He no longer smiles, lips parted for open mouthed pants to come through. When his head tilts down, the eyes are a stark white; they bore into him, and for a fleeting moment, Will seems calm.

He stares at himself, and says, *"See?"*

And he does.

Sees himself move. Sees himself bleed. Sees himself reach.

Will sees himself die.

There's movement, somewhere. Footsteps—a sharp intake of breath, a pause. Movement again.

"Fuck, somebody get a medic in here," someone says behind him. He looks to the window outside, the shades offering a barred view of the agents pulling up and surrounding the area. He looks to the floor, where the girl is gagging. She looks like her mother, lying there, staring up at him and the stranger-body of her father on the floor. Her mouth opens and closes, over and over, and her eyes remain remarkably present as someone presses a firm hand against her wound.

Everyone moves around him. As the girl *(Abigail,* her name is *Abigail)* is pressed into a gurney and rushed into an ambulance, Will is left to stare at his own body. It's propped against the drawers, mocking, looking upwards with a blank stare that's already begun to grow a little misty.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs' flesh suit lays in a crumpled heap on the floor, a performance shed to reveal the final act. It's cleaned up and stuffed away for evidence before he can actually think to look at it.

"Going to be hard to clean up," he croaks eventually to agent Katz, standing out on the front step. The body's been moved, but there's still blood there, taped off and being photographed. "This…all this."

Katz stares at the body being carried out, and knows what face lies behind the sheet. "Yeah." She says. A pause. She looks to the retreating ambulance, and then to Wills shaking hands.

There's not much blood on him, save for the slight dotting here and there from the spray of Abigail's throat, but he feels coated in it. Will wishes he could shed his skin, as Hobbs had.

Katz leaves him be. The agents don't look at him, too busy trying to wave away the neighbors that have come out of their homes to investigate. He is left by himself. He stares up at the house. He stares from the lawn, and from the car he's packed into, and doesn't look away even as it rolls from sight.

Will's hands don't stop shaking. Hours after, tremors still run through him as he's stripped of his suit and forced into a shower. Fingers run over his cheeks, his eyelids, and he imagines what it will be like when his Other corpse is cut open, if Garret Jacob Hobb's will be flesh and blood, or a hollow husk.

He washes off the flecks of Abigail Hobbs' blood, and presses his head against the smooth tiled walls, feeling like he's filled with cotton.

"I *told* you."

"I know. I know you did, but-"

"No," Alana Bloom snaps, looking less like a human being and more like a force of nature. "You don't get to interrupt, because *I told you* this would happen. I *told* you this was going to get attention, I *told* you that he wasn't ready, and what did you do?" She doesn't wait for him to answer. "You didn't listen. You ignored me in favor of sending him out there unprepared, on some run that was completely unnecessary."

Chilton, who has been seated silently beside Alana, uncrosses his legs, and speaks. "It wasn't an unnecessary run, Dr. Bloom. He did have a target to take out."

She doesn't look to Chilton. Her eyes haven't strayed from Jack since she walked into the room. "He didn't need to go out there, though. We could have had a team go out and take care of it on their own. We've done it before—it wouldn't have been hard."

"I know we could have." Jack says, clearly exasperated. "What happened is on me. I get that. I take full responsibility. I'm the one who put him out there, I'm the one who's dealing with the shit that's blowing back from this whole thing."

His features seem to drag, then. It's been a long day; that much can be seen by the paperwork taking up the majority of his desk. His phone would have been ringing if he hadn't unplugged it.

"So we're done with this. No more putting him out in the line of fire, no more outside missions. We're done."

There's silence as Alana waits for an affirmation from either, or both. Neither say anything.

"I've talked to Mr. Graham, and he says he's still willing to work." Chilton says. "The events that transpired weren't planned, no, but that doesn't mean we should stop altogether. We've had mishaps in the past and we've dealt with them just fine."

"And this wasn't our regular kind of case," Jack hops in just as Alana opens her mouth to argue. "We've only dealt with shapeshifters once or twice. We couldn't have known we'd have a case of misidentification like this."

Alana's eyes narrow into slits. "Don't start acting like you didn't know the risk you were taking. And Will agreeing to stay with this work shouldn't be the deciding factor. He just saw someone bleed out and another almost murdered—he killed someone who looked just like him! No one can just go through that and carry on like nothing happened."

"So you don't trust Mr. Graham's judgement? You think he isn't capable of making his own decisions?" Chilton fires back.

“What? No, that’s not what I’m saying-“

Jack leans forwards in his chair. *“Look.* I understand why you’re worried. I’m worried as well. But he won’t be going through this alone—he’s got you and Dr. Chilton here with him.”

That doesn’t bring Alana any kind of comfort. She pinches the bridge of her nose, eyes closed for a moment as she attempts to collect herself and keep from saying anything particularly harsh. When she opens them, Alana’s gaze finally does stray between both Chilton and Jack. “If you’re going to do this, just…make sure he has distance from it. I don’t want to see anything else like what just happened.”

“I can’t guarantee it won’t, but I’ll try.” Jack says, and offers a reassuring look. He expects a smile back, and his own expression falls when she fails to offer it up. “I’ll have to keep him in for a couple days, if that makes you feel any better. I’m up to my elbows in reports right now. The public wants a written statement on what happened.”

“What are you going to tell them?” Alana asks.

“Whatever I’m told to tell them.” Jack says. “We’ll cover it up just fine, like we always do.”

Alana and Chilton believe him, for the most part, trusting in the government’s powers in keeping everything hush hush. They leave Jack to his own devices, to fill out paperwork and take calls when he pleases.

There’s a moment, later on in the night, where he believes that everything can and will be worked out. His superiors have stopped calling, and there’s only two more stacks of papers to go through. He sits back in his chair, hands behind his head, and sighs. His doctor will kill him for the spike in his blood pressure for sure, but Jack is sure this will all fall away in a matter of days. Murders happen all the time, and the media’s interest will move on from ‘Matt Small’ towards his daugher’s recovery story. They like miracles, and surviving an attack like that will strike a chord in America’s heart.

(Whatever she says that might be unusual or unnatural can be swept under the rug as trauma messing with her memories; doctors and therapists can be paid off with the right amount of money and incentive)

Jack is certain of all of this for exactly two minutes before his phone pings. He frowns, swiping his thumb across the notification. “Shit,” he says, rising up in his chair. “Shit, shit, *shit—“*

The article, in itself, details nothing particularly different or significant to the other numerous columns on the case in the beginning. It explains the crime, Matt Small, and, briefly, the current state of Abigail Small.

Only after the first paragraph is what causes Jack to continue his string of *shit*’s.

The local police will have you believe that this is just a case of psychosis from an ailing father, who had tendencies for violence towards his family. The government will have you believe this is something to sweep under the rug. But myself, and my readers, know that this is far from the truth, and whatever that truth might be, it's far bigger than the tarp they attempt to cover it up with. This crime raises the question from whether Meta-Humans simply live amongst us, to whether they might be living and working in higher offices.

"There's two bodies on the scene," Officer Sanchez informed. "Matt Small and his wife. I haven't been able to see his body yet, but…something's not right there."

After this interview, he refused to offer any further comments, but this is damning enough. What happened to Matt Small's body? Why haven't any records or pictures of the corpse been sent from the morgue? Why have the authorities refused to explain why government mandated vehicles were present at the scene, if this is a simple crime?

And who, exactly, is this man?

Jack doesn't read anything else once he scrolls down to see the picture. It's a single shot in front of the house, zoomed in from a camera's view, of Will, standing still and shaken. The blood dotting his face have been brightened and enlarged, just to make the scene seem that much more gruesome for any reader to imagine.

Readers who are hitting the site, coming in hoards, all of whom will take Tattle-Conspiracy's words first over any police report.

Jack stands only to kick his desk in frustration, knowing he's well and thoroughly fucked as the phone starts shrieking again.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A few fingers curl at the base of his neck, saved from contact by the collar of his jumpsuit. It feels like an owner sliding a collar over some stray dog they've found, tightening it to fit and clicking on a neat little leash to tug this feral animal around as they please.

Jack smiles. "We're going to do great things together, Mr. Graham."

Chapter Notes

Yeah, so remember what I said about those updates every two weeks? Sorry about that.

I will be TRYING to meet my own deadlines! School is currently killing me, but I'm getting back into the swing of it and will be right and fit soon enough!

Also, as you might have noticed, I added a few new tags to this whole thing. Honestly, I didn't think I needed to since it's essentially part of the character as I see him and a minor part of the story, but I felt like it needed to be included all the same, especially since this chapter makes a few mentions of it.

Will is baby-faced and twitchy and thirteen.

His hair has grown from it's usual shorn cut, fluffing out every direction. His jaw is making an appearance somewhere on his face, the beginnings of defined and frail features, but just only. His neck is long, and his skin is pale. There's still a slight drawl of Louisiana in his voice, one that he's trying to grow out of completely.

A nurse who is too kind and holds contact for too long once told Will he was handsome. He's not too sure if that's true; whenever he looks at himself in the mirror, he doesn't see anything particularly handsome. Just a boy in a jumpsuit, sitting on his bed, staring and trying to find something that's not there.

There isn't much time to look at mirrors, now. Ever since he hit ten, men in lab coats and heavy padded armor have been carting from left and right, always babbling on about how his DNA is so fascinating, how his abilities are incredible, how they're very lucky to have ever gotten such a unique little test subject.

And the tests—they're not terrible, really. It's just always him sitting across from someone, visible or hidden by a black visor, watching and waiting for his cues to speak. You feel sad, he'll say. You feel happy now. Now you're disappointed. Disappointment tastes bad.

Can you be more specific? The doctor will ask, gentle tone edging on annoyed. I'm not asking how it tastes, Will. I need you to tell me exactly what I'm feeling. Tell me if I'm lying to you.

So, Will does tell him when he's lying. It's easy. There's always a spike of doubt and fear and knowing before everything settles again, the ripples gone from the sea. All the scientists are very impressed, talking amongst themselves as they pluck the little white suction cups from Will's head, data stored for later examination.

None of them ever really talk to him. Will doesn't really want them to. He's always content to just sit and watch, legs kicking back and forth, clutching the sides of his seat as adults putter about around him.

One time, after a test, the doctor gives him a sweet. He sticks it in his mouth and sucks on it till it's dissolved on his tongue, jittering afterward in his room. He hears them call it "positive reinforcement", and they keep up the treatment with each test. If he does well, if he's able to give them what they want, he gets a sweet. Will finds that it's a wonderful little set up for himself, and it makes him eager to go into the lab for a while.

It ends when, after, as the doctor was handing over his treat, Will had stuck his hand out. The doctor had flinched back, and Will had smiled, happily chirping that he felt fear (he doesn't question why; he's never been asked why someone might feel any sort of way). The doctor had looked at him funny and tucked the packaged treat away.

There haven't been any sweets since then. The tests have been nothing special, just visors and questions, scientists talking back and forth, ping-ponging ideas off of one another.

Most of the time, Mr. Krendler (a tall man who's only just recently taken over the project) watches over it all like a hawk. Will never has to look to check; he's there, always, from the hallway or the corner of a room. He's tall, and a little plain looking, and his eyes chase after the nurses most times, but he keeps everything in check. He's there to make sure that no test goes too far without his say-so, and if it is too far, that it's under his own supervision.

"We're going to try something today, Will." Mr. Krendler says, sitting down on next to him on the lab table.

Will cocks his head to the side, eyes wide as he asks, "What is it?"

"It's not going to be hard. It's just like what you've done here. A test. But now, it isn't just a run. This is the real thing." He says. "It's very important you get this right. You're a smart kid—you can manage that, can't you?"

Will can, and expresses that he can rather happily. Mr. Krendler smiles and pats his shoulder, moving on to murmur something to one of the attending scientists standing not too far away. There's excitement bubbling then, little jittery bugs weaving over and under his skin. It's an

electricity in the air from Mr. Krendler and the assisting crew, one that Will can't help but reflect. But the excitement is his own, in a way; Will wants to be useful, wants to do something new and worthwhile, that will make someone feel even an ounce of pride in him.

This itching need for praise makes him put on his best face and best behavior, even as he's poked and prodded a few times in preparation.

The room they take him to after is one he's never seen before. It's plain and dull, with heavy florescent lights above. A table separates two plain chairs, and a large, black mirror faces the furniture from the wall. Mr. Krendler leads Will to sit down, his hand twitching before he touches Will's shoulder with a soft pat. There are no reassuring words to come along with it. Will wriggles under the grip, ignoring the need to shrug it off.

His touch remains as Will hears the door behind them open. He tries to twist around to see who it is, but Mr. Krendler holds him in place firmly (not harshly, or violently, but simply keeping his hand still and his grip firm so that Will knows better than to try and struggle). It isn't a particularly long wait to see who comes through, and Will can't help but stare in awe.

The women he has seen around the facility always seem a little bland, all looking alike. He understands now that it's part of the dress code, and that all women don't have their hair tied up in tight buns and wear clinical gowns and uniforms. But the one who comes in, heels clicking as she walks, has him dumbstruck. She's not very tall, and certainly not as pale as he is; her mouth is red and her eyes are blue, (or green? Maybe both) and her hair is short and curled around her shoulders. It's red, but not quite red, and Will feels the distinct urge to try and touch it.

He doesn't. He stays still and stares as she sits down on the chair opposite to him.

"So," She says. Her eyes are sharp as she stares down Mr. Krendler. Her voice is warm despite it, smooth with an accent. "You're running a daycare."

Mr. Krendler smiles. "I know he's young, Starling, but he's one of our best."

"He's the only one you've managed to keep. That doesn't mean he's your best."

A pinch of anger manages to escape Mr. Krendler, but his voice is just as clear and calm as before. "The others were flukes. They were unstable. But Will here," Mr. Krendler pats his shoulder. "He's perfect. He's been working hard. Haven't you, Will?" He looks down at the boy. Will nods his head with a slight smile. It's the first time Starling actually looks at him. "I think he'd be useful in the field—or just in here, if you'd give him a chance."

"We can't take chances with meta-humans." Starling looks at Will, seeming to assess him for just a moment. "But I'm not here to try and make that decision."

Mr. Krendler smiles, victorious. "That's right- you got demoted to being a messenger, didn't you? After-"

"If you wouldn't mind leaving, I'll start my assessment of your subject now." Starling watches him. Her eyes are cold. "Unless you'd like this 'messenger' to send another report of

harassment."

Their gazes are locked, a silent but primal fight for dominance in the stuffy room. Mr. Krendler is forced to relent after a moment or so, head jerking to the side as he mutters something under his breath before making his exit. Will flinches a little as the door slams shut.

Even with Krendler gone, Starling doesn't look at ease. But it's not fear he feels—there's no tense anxiety or concern for her wellbeing or anything of the like. It's just a blank canvas, true neutrality as she considers Will once again. She's unreadable, and Will can't help but want to push back and dig his fingers into that untouched, fertile soil.

"Can you see?" She asks after a beat.

"Yes, ma'am." Will nods, and makes a vague gesture to his eyes. They're not quite white, but misty looking, the pupil greyed and the iris a milky sort of blue. "It's just my—they told me it's because I'm using my abilities often. Nothing's wrong with them."

"Right." Starling doesn't look convinced. "You're not looking at me though."

"It's—it's uncomfortable, ma'am."

"Why?"

Will frowns, gripping the edges of his seat. It's not the best kind of anchor, but it works. "It makes it hard to think. The rest of everything kind of goes away when I look at people's eyes, and it makes me feel sick." Will swallows thickly. "Makes me feel like somebody's staring at me."

Starling watches him for a moment or two. The cogs in her brain are turning, twitching as they work with the information he's just given her. It's not particularly interesting stuff, and not something anyone's asked him before.

Whatever it is that she takes note of, she stores away for later use. Will wishes that he had telepathy rather than empathy in that moment, and in many other moments before. He only has emotions to work off of—nothing concrete or solid, like thoughts. He's working with a puzzle that he can't complete, left with only a sour, half-finished image.

Starling seems just a little kinder, then, offering just the slightest smile. "Alright, Will. I better get down to the real business here. I'm going to tell you a few things. Couple of them are going to be lies. You're going to catch me in it. You ready?" She asks and Will nods. "Good. Tell me when."

And so he tells her.

She listens, and nods, and speaks, and doesn't let him in on anything. But Will knows he's right; he can feel the slightest twitches of her personality flaking off when something she says doesn't seem quite right. The session doesn't last too long; Will is used to playing this kind of game for hours, but Starling only gives him thirty minutes or so before she stands and dusts

off her skirt. She doesn't really say goodbye, just offers him a sort of odd, sympathetic glance before exiting. Will swears he can hear the click of her high heels echoing in his head even after she's left.

Whatever kind of test it had been, Will fails it. Miserably.

"The spectrum," Mr. Krendler says when they're in the lab. He's talking to one of the attendants, smacking the back of his hand against the piece of paper he's holding. "On the fucking spectrum, can you believe that?"

The attendant offers a helpless shrug. "He does fit the usual type. It lines up."

"Didn't mean she had to write a whole sob story about on how we're abusing on some..." Mr. Krendler sighs and glances at Will from the corner of his eye. He clears his throat. "It doesn't matter, though. They'll let it slide. He passed what he needed to—this place already breaks enough morality clauses that they'll turn a blind eye to that fact."

Starling's visit doesn't change much about the way he's treated or the things he does. Everything slides back into the routine, easy and smooth.

Starling does not make another visit, to Will's dismay. There's the occasional comment about her from Mr. Krendler, though they're tinged with bitterness that Will doesn't want to associate with her memory.

That kind nurse isn't exactly a substitute for her, but she looks similar. Her hair is unruly like his own, sticking out from the bun no matter how many times she tries to tie it back up. There are freckles dotting her upturned nose and cheeks, and her breath doesn't smell like smoke when she speaks. "How many inches have you grown? Two? Three?" She'll ask him almost every week, taking the time to measure even though it isn't required. Will knows that she puts the bar a little higher than his head actually meets, but he plays along anyways.

His fourteenth birthday is the only one that's actually celebrated. The ones before have passed without any real recognition besides a dismissive mention. Will's never been bothered by it, honestly; it wasn't like he'd had that great of parties before all of this. He remembers his dad would just give him a pack of gummy bears and a pat on the head, remind him how many years it would be before he could start pulling his own weight in their family of two.

It isn't a big party, but it's closer to the actual image of what a birthday is supposed to be. Will comes into the examination room in a wrinkly, itchy dressing gown. The nurse (he's learned her name's Lily, as she's insisted he call her that rather than ma'am) is waiting for him, as per usual, her excitement barely contained and bubbling to the surface. There's no time to question what she's so happy about before she brings both her hands forward, a tiny cupcake pressed into her palm.

The icing on top has been smeared and flattened down, and the holder is a flimsy dotted paper. Lily smiles so brightly he's nearly blinded by her teeth and dimples. "This can be our little secret for your special day." She says as Will takes the cupcake from her.

It confirms the creeping thought that this isn't authorized and that she might get in trouble for doing this, so he doesn't really take the time to savor the treat. Will hastily rips off the paper and stuffs it in his mouth, nearly choking on the sweetness and the spongey vanilla before he swallows it whole. He offers a thank you beyond his stuffed cheeks.

As Lily checks him, Will is sure to wipe clean any sort of remnant of the cupcake from his mouth, running his tongue over his teeth, swallowing enough times that Lily gives him a funny look and asks if he's alright. He just doesn't want her act of kindness to get her kicked from the program; Mr. Krendler's been cracking down on the lab attendants and scientists, and he won't be afraid to let one of their nurses have it either.

The cupcake isn't what gets her fired, though. She stays for a few more months, and her smiles disappear as he comes in with a buzzcut, and multiple circles shaved into his head, making a fuss when the skin of his scalp appears red and agitated. Lily tells him she's going to have a word with Mr. Krendler, ignoring the way he begs her not to.

He doesn't know if Lily leaves or is fired. Will just comes in for the next examination with another nurse on duty who doesn't answer his questions. She smells like forty years of smoke. Will feels suffocated by it the few rare times she chooses to speak.

He is sixteen when they want him to touch someone again.

He's been without human contact since they've gotten him. They've been careful not to let him touch anyone. There'd been a few tests where he'd touched plants, objects that were technically alive but not sentient, but nothing had come of it. Will supposes he should be surprised that they want him to do this now, but it's about right. They've repeated tests for over twelve years now—they want their new data, and he's not really a child anymore.

They need to test their theories of whether he can only kill when he's in extreme distress, or simply through a touch. There's been no way to test it without someone making a fuss.

Will is set up in a quarantine area, the doors locked and the windows thick glass. There's just a table, a chair, and a machine set up on the side to collect Will's brain frequencies for further examination once this is all over. Mr. Krendler and a few scientists watch from beyond the glass, eyes wide and eager as they stare.

Will is sat behind the table. In front of him is a cage with two rats. They're white, pink noses twitching as they scurry to every corner of the cage to try and see their new surroundings. Will feels a horrible sense of dread and an overwhelming amount of guilt.

"Go on, Will," one of the head attendants says through the microphone, one of the rats squeaking in response to the static.

Will says nothing, just stares at the two furry little creatures. They're just animals—dumb, stupid little animals who don't know where they are or what's going to happen. Even when it does, if it does, they won't know the reason why. They won't understand any of it.

Krendler manhandles the microphone towards himself. “Come on, Will.”

Will brings his hands upon the table, but they’re balled in fists on the cool metal. One of the rats turns to him curiously, hopping up towards the side, climbing up on the bars.

“I’m sorry,” Will whispers. He raises a fist, forcing it to uncurl. His fingers tremble as he reaches out, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth and breathing out a string of apologies. The rat tilts its head towards his finger. *It's a stupid animal,* he tells himself. *Just a stupid fucking animal.*

There’s the feather-light sensation of whispers brushing against his skin, a wet nose just pressing against his fingertip—

The rat lets out an unholy sound, a squealed cry withering up in its throat. It seems frozen as it falls away from the bars, stiff and unnatural as it lies at the bottom of the cage. The other rat is quiet for just a second before it’s crying out, sprinting around the cage and avoiding the body at all costs, scratching and biting at the bars around it.

Will retreats as soon as it’s over, an itchy kind of wetness gathering up at the edges of his eyes. Someone comes in and takes the rats away, one screaming and one dead. Mr. Krendler gives him a big smile. There’s no pat on the shoulder this time. Will wouldn’t want to touch him either, after what they’d all just seen.

“Our branch is expanding because of you, Will.” Mr. Krendler tells him. They’re in his room, Will on his bed and staring at the TV on the wall. Mr. Krendler is sitting on a chair just to his left. “We have several more meta-humans in custody, and we’re testing them just like you. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Where are they?” Will asks, not turning his attention away from the screen.

“Separate facilities. It’s too much of a hazard to keep all of you housed together right now. I’m hoping that sometime in the future that we can do that.” Mr. Krendler smiles. Ambition and hope and a hunger for something Will doesn’t quite know yet leaks through as he scoots just a little closer. “You might be able to go out there and fight for your country one day, put in troops with people like you.”

“So I’d be a weapon.” It’s not a question. Will is eighteen now and knows his place in the program.

Mr. Krendler shakes his head. “No, no. You’d be a hero, Will. You’d go down in the history books. They’d detail how you jumpstarted this movement for all of your kind.”

Krendler doesn’t want fame for Will; he wants fame for himself. It’s understandable, in a way. He’s given a good few years of his life to this program, pulled strings that shouldn’t have even been flicked in the first place. Krendler wants to get something out of this, and he’s going to some great lengths to meet his goal.

“Are they all like me?” Will asks.

“Of course they’re all meta-humans—“

“No. I mean, did they all sort of…have they always been in the program? Like I have?”

Krendler hesitates before shaking his head. “No. They haven’t. But that’s why you’re our special case—you’ve cooperated with us since day one. You’ve given us knowledge that we couldn’t have gotten otherwise. That’s something to be proud of.”

Will isn’t proud of it. He doesn’t feel like he should be, and that isn’t why he asked. It’s just something that tells him those strings Krendler’s been pulling at have gone farther than he’d expected. The meta-humans they’re taking in to train, or experiment on, or whatever else, are not willing participants. Will’s not even sure if he can count himself as a willing participant considering he’d had no other option. The M.C.P doesn’t seem to care about that, though, and it’s not good to worry over something he has no control over.

“I’ll be visiting one of them soon, actually. I’ve got to make my rounds since I’m the head of the program. Everything’s got to be in shape for when our superiors come around for another check.” Mr. Krendler stands up, gaze flicking towards the TV. It’s a sitcom, the subtitles on even though the volume is on. He frowns, shaking his head. “You’ll rot your brain staring at that all day. Then what are we going to do with you?”

“I don’t know.” Will shrugs. His eyes, only visible by the grey pupil, finally meet Mr. Krendler. “I’m not good for much else.”

It’s not meant to be any kind of joke, but Krendler gives a stiff laugh anyways, walking out of Will’s quarters with a slight wave goodbye.

It is the last time Will ever sees him.

He is told it’s an accident. A terrible, unfortunate accident that he has no business looking into. No one answers his questions when they’re asked, and everyone seems to pretend as though nothing happened at all. Boxes are moved out of the director's office quietly but efficiently. The entire staff looks shaken for several days.

Will only gets the information he wants by accident. He’s waiting in the lab for further testing, leaning against the examination table as the attendant overseeing him makes a quick exit to find some instrument in another room. The guards stationed at the door pay him little mind, talking back and forth in a muttered conversation. They don’t see him inch closer to nearest table, brushing a few papers away from a file labeled INCIDENT REPORT.

It's only a photograph and a letter from the executive of their junior branch. It’s very brief, stating that Paul Krendler went to their third base of operations. He set up a meeting with a newly obtained subject (only described as that, *subject).* The subject broke from its restraints and barricaded the door. Upon forced entry, the subject was exterminated, as per M.C.P protocol.

Will isn't able to read more than that. He's stuck on the image of Krendler's body, sprawled on the floor. His eyes are open, rolled up as if staring up at his open skull. The bloody dome of it is placed not too far from his corpse. There's a spongey matter sloshing out.

There's a gloved hand on his shoulder, a scolding muffled by a mask as he's torn away from the file.

He still manages to read that, according to eyewitnesses, Paul Krendler was forced to eat part of his own brain.

They find their new executive two weeks later.

"Jack Crawford," he says, because personal introductions are apparently better for this kind of situation. His hand is extended, an inviting smile offered alongside it.

"I know," Will hesitates before accepting the shake. Jack's hand feels warm through the glove. "You're replacing Krendler."

"I wouldn't call it replacing. It's just…new management. You know how it goes." Jack says, as if Will has any idea of 'how it goes'.

"Yeah."

Jack's neck is craning. His head bobs subtly to meet Will's own evasive twitches. "I heard you had problems with socializing? I hope that isn't going to hurt our work together."

"Our work?" Will echoes back, giving a soft huff of a laugh. He avoids the topic of his 'condition'. Krendler never wanted to talk about it. Will doesn't really want to either. An empath who has an empathy problem; it's a horrible dose of irony that he's all too aware of.

Jack is quiet for a moment, analyzing him. He's trying to piece something together—what, Will doesn't really know. He raises a hand. "May I?"

Will doesn't tell him if he can, or if Will wants him to touch him. Jack does it anyways, placing his touch down on Will's shoulder. A few fingers curl at the base of his neck, saved from contact by the collar of his jumpsuit. It feels like an owner sliding a collar over some stray dog they've found, tightening it to fit and clicking on a neat little leash to tug this feral animal around as they please.

Jack smiles. "We're going to do great things together, Mr. Graham."

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Alana is practically scratching at the door to talk to him, to understand his thoughts and memories, but he can help himself. He is determined to do so if only so that he can prove he doesn't need any coddling after all of this is over.

And it will be over. Everything ends, eventually, and so will the occasional flash of spilled blood and blank eyes and a gasping mouth. Not now, but eventually.

Chapter Notes

Uuuuuh so it's official. I'm the Actual Worst.

First off: I'm so sorry.

Second off: a lot of things happened and apparently I just can't ever make deadlines work, but here we are! Back on track and without a schedule! This train's going rogue everyone (that's not a good thing, but whatever)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is a day of absolutely nothing. Will is taken to the cafeteria three times, and he is taken to the showers once. Jack doesn't call for him, Alana doesn't come to see him, and he isn't brought along to see Chilton. He knows it isn't to be kind or thoughtful to his own mental state; even though he hasn't spoken to anyone about what happened, he can practically taste the panic in the air. Something's gotten out somewhere, someone's seen something, and now their branch is scrambling to cover it up.

It's not the first time he's witnessed this, of course. They've made their mistakes in the past. Will had heard the accounts of another meta-human that managed to fight their way out from containment. They'd shot off into the sky like a comet, only to burn out in an instant from overexertion of their powers.

The local authorities had brushed it off as a firework, (even when it was the middle of April) and reminded those around that it was illegal to set them off without a permit.

This isn't that, though. Will can feel it. He knows it.

The guards who come for him the second day are almost surprised by his eagerness to get up and go, keeping a safe distance behind him as he strides through the hallway. Will needs to learn the details of what happened after, if only to understand the situation. He has the right to know the state of the organization, at least.

The state of Abigail Small is another matter entirely.

He is brought into the room where his sessions with Chilton usually take place, and for a moment Will believes that they've finally called for another appointment. Except Chilton isn't waiting there with one leg crossed over the other, notepad in hand. There is no one seated on the other side of the table, actually. Soon, there is no one in the room besides him.

Will looks around for a moment, looking to the mirrored panel to his right, frowning at whoever hides behind it before, slowly, taking a seat.

There isn't any reason he should feel worried. Chilton (or whoever else is joining him) might just be running late, but there's a knot of anxiety wriggling around in his guts, causing him to twitch and fiddle with the cuffs of his sleeves. He isn't sure if it's his, or just a ripple from the people around him.

Five minutes pass before the door opens again, Will almost turning fully in his seat to see who it is, relaxing just slightly as Alana makes her way forwards. This relief only lasts for a moment, however, as he sees the sag to her shoulders, the shadows hiding under her eyes. It isn't like he hasn't seen her tired before—Will's been witness to her moments of exhaustion after nights of reports, or just when her worry forces her to stare at the ceiling till dawn.

But this is more than that, and he doesn't have to be an empath to see it. He says nothing until she sits. He gives Alana another cursory glance. "Sleep any last night?"

"No," Alana says, and it sounds like she's said it a thousand times already. Her fingers rub gently at her eye, somehow careful enough not to smudge her mascara despite her exhaustion. "The last two days have been a little rough on me. It's nothing I can't handle."

Will nods as to acknowledge her reassurance, and silence has its turn at their table. He looks at her, and she alternates between him and her own folded hands.

Questions hang in the air, and Will doesn't want to push, but he has to. Alana's giving him nothing, obviously struggling with what news she can give him, or what she can't. He shuffles in his seat, stuffing his hands deep into his pockets. "I'm guessing Jack isn't too happy."

"No, he's not." Alana shakes her head before looking at him with a soft expression. "This isn't your fault, Will. None of it is. No one's unhappy with you, if that's what you're thinking."

"I know that." Will pauses. "…You can't say I'm not at least a little to blame, though."

"If anyone has any blame, it's Jack. He's the one who conducted this, and now it's his mess to clean."

“Does that mess include Abigail Small?”

Alana takes a moment to consider her words carefully. She already knows the question he didn’t quite ask, and Will is sure this is part of the news that she isn’t allowed to share. “We’re keeping an eye on her recovery.”

Recovery. It’s not a guarantee of any kind of survival, but it’s something. The tight feeling in his chest eases some, not completely undone, but getting there. Of course, now that he knows she survived, there’s the question of what will happen to her after. Will had seen the mother fade right in front of him, and he knew they had no immediate family, so where would Abigail go? That same tight feeling returned, just as horrid as before as his thoughts swirled round and round, thinking of the possibilities as Alana went on.

“We sent a message to be relayed to the public, just to ease some of the tension. It’s a small town, and the…*events* were unusual for the community.” She pauses. Breathes. Continues. “Before we got it out, there was another kind of report. Basically just a glorified tabloid.”

“Tattle-Conspiracy.” Will shrugs as Alana gives him a wide-eyed look. “I still have the internet. It’s the first thing that pops up when you type in ‘meta-humans’.”

There’s the question of why Will would even be searching for meta-humans, but Alana doesn’t press on the matter. She takes the information as it is, and moves on swiftly (he’s sure there are more important things for them to worry about than what he might do with his free time).

“Yes. Tattle-Conspiracy. Freddie Lounds managed to get on the scene and get a few pictures of the area.” She pauses. Her lips form a thin, tense line. “One of those pictures was of you. It wasn’t too revealing, but the author mentioned that you were the only one to go in and out of the house with blood on you, besides the bodies, so...” She leaves it there.

“So, people are looking into it, and there's no record of me.”

“Exactly.” Alana nods. “They want answers. We’re handling it as best as we can.”

The tension around the facility starts to make sense, then. Will can also imagine why Chilton’s taken his leave at the moment; he’d be the one to scurry into the shadows the second things started to get rough.

“How is that going?”

“Fine.”

He doesn’t need to try and pry for the truth. The slight uptick in anxiety and a sense of knowing is all he needs. “I’m guessing there won’t be any more field missions for a while.”

“Jack’s not pressing on them. He’ll start up again, eventually, but he’s lying low for now. We all are.”

“I’ve got restrictions again, don’t I.”

“Only for a little while. In a week or two, they’ll back off.” Alana gives him a sympathetic look. “Like I said, we’re figuring it out. Everyone’s going to hurt till this is fixed.”

He’s not worried about what might happen to him. The government won’t terminate the program because of one slip up like this; they won’t be happy for some time, and it’ll take Jack a while to gain back enough trust to go through with another project like this, but there’s no reason to think that it will affect his own wellbeing.

Alana gives him a run-down on things he doesn’t necessarily care to hear, after that. There’s a comfort in being ignorant, and he’s already been given what he really wants to know.

Restrictions are exactly what they sound like. The few privileges he has will be taken— his (very limited) internet access, occasional free range around the halls, all of it. Everything will be on lockdown until this mess is fixed, *if* it is fixed.

He’s seen Tattle-Conspiracy before, browsed through it once or twice before someone looked into his internet history and blocked the site from his viewing. It’s little more than a glorified blog, but it has its following. People liked sensationalized shit. Even if he’s never seen society work through news like this first hand, he has an idea of how quickly they’ll eat it up.

His restrictions start up a day after he speaks to Alana. He isn’t allowed outside his quarters except to take showers, and even then he’s on constrained time limits. The air around the facility, from what he’s experienced, is a strange stillness. No one moves without being monitored. Nothing is said that isn’t already scripted. Everything is carefully being controlled and contained and calculated.

Will sits on his cot, legs crossed over one another. He pulls at the almost blindingly white sock on his foot, tugging gently as he watches the TV screen ahead.

The news anchor is a blonde woman with plain features who stares out from behind her desk at nothing in particular, reporting on a story that the channel has been following for several days now.

The fact that there might be meta-humans out in the world and living amongst them instead of in cages is one thing; the possibility of them lurking around in the government, working as agents or possibly in even high positions, is alarming, to say the least, and every news station is taking the opportunity to eat it up.

The screen turns over to a reporter in the street, his breath coming out in smoky wisps against the foam microphone in his hand. A group of protesters stand in the background, their shouts muffled but their signs explaining loud and clear why they’re there. Another flip of the screen and the microphone is placed in front of the mouth of a pale woman whose mouth is too big for her face, features scrunched in frustration. *“The public has a right to know if our government is harboring meta-humans! We have a right to know where they are, who they are, and why they’re in hiding!”*

He feels a sudden urge to shout at the TV, to reach beyond the screen and shake sense into everyone behind it. *I'm not hiding!* He wants to scream into the microphone, into their faces. *They're not harboring me from you, they're making sure you're safe!*

It's a feeling that passes quickly enough, Will almost deflating as the anger seeps out at the realization that shouting will not help, and would likely only make the guards standing at the door outside barge in.

Pressing his fingertips to the space between his eyes in some hope that his budding headache would wilt with the pressure.

He takes naps more often, now. It makes the time pass faster and gives his brain reprieve from turning the events of Garret Jacob Hobbs' death over and over—

(Which he can still see in his mind's eye; sunlight fitting into the kitchen, shining on his bloodstained skin, mouth split open in a panting, wild smile as he laid motionless on the floor, white eyes finally bland and dulled and away from everything here)

He's working on it, though. Chilton and Alana are practically scratching at the door to talk to him, to understand his thoughts and memories, but he can help himself. He is determined to do so if only so that he can prove he doesn't need any coddling after all of this is over.

And it will be over. Everything ends, eventually, and so will the occasional flash of spilled blood and blank eyes and a gasping mouth. Not now, but soon.

(He hopes)

In the midst of the crisis, Chilton returns.

The psychiatrist has one leg crossed over the other, his usual slight stubble having grown into something scruffier. He hasn't lost his composure, but there's still something stiff about him. If things get worse, Will already knows he'll be ready to run. There's fear there, and some scavenger instinct sniffing for an opportunity.

"It's good to see you again." Chilton says.

Will doesn't respond, distracted while imagining himself as some bloated corpse lazily bobbing down a stream that a beady vulture has finally decided is ready to have its meat stripped away by a very eager beak.

"Miss Bloom hasn't exactly been updating me on you and your wellbeing—I'm sure she's been busy with more pressing matters, though." He barely smiles, and shuffles to cross his other leg. A pause. "Your last trek outside must have been traumatizing."

"It was upsetting." Will concedes, and lets out an annoyed puff of air as Chilton stares on at him for more. "Calling it traumatic would mean psychological damage. I've seen people die before. It really wasn't anything new."

Chilton raises a brow. “But all of those instances were in a controlled environment.”

“So?” Will presses, indifference growing into agitation.

“So, it was new. A new environment, new people—an entirely new situation for you. Besides, you’ve killed people for a cause. You’ve never seen them brutally murdered and bleeding out.”

And that’s true. Will has seen people pale and stiff and lifeless, carried out in bags and through white halls to be cremated and swept under the rug, but never once has he seen someone choking on their own blood, spastic as life seeped right out of them until now.

He’s not about to let Chilton win, though, especially not when he’s poking and prodding at a spot he knows is sore. “You’re trying to psychoanalyze again, Frederick. It’s not exactly your strong suit.” Venom drips off of his every word. “Quit while you’re ahead.”

There’s a twitch of something like insult before Chilton smooths his own ruffled feathers, clicking his pen and tucking into the pocket of his suit. His notepad is left to rest on his thigh. “I can see that you’re not in the best state of mind. I understand.” His sincerity is faked fully this time, and Will can’t help but be proud he brought out this split second of true self out of Chilton. “There’s no need to be rude to someone who’s just trying to help you, though.”

Silence snakes in between them, sitting heavily in the room. Chilton seems to wait on him, expectant of some kind of retort on how he isn’t there to help, but simply examine Will like some pretty specimen and gain fame off of having contact with him.

Will actually considers it, because it’s all true. But he just sits, sinking into that quiet. He won’t give any room for satisfaction here.

Chilton finally seems to get the message, and sits back, creases forming around his eyes and between his brows. The neutrality of a bland psychiatrist is breaking. Not all the way, (Will hasn’t done enough to get him that far, unfortunately) but it’s a start.

The tension doesn’t leave, but Chilton resumes a conversation that had never really been initiated. “Have you been experiencing any cabin fever? It must be terrible, being cooped up in your quarters.”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Will nods. “It’s not like I had free range before.”

Chilton pauses. It isn’t silent; Will can practically hear the cogs of Chilton’s brain turning, grinding, trying to pop out some brilliant idea. He picks up his pen and presses a dot of ink against his paper. “You seem comfortable with the idea of isolation, though.”

There’s something in his tone. Will recognizes it as a threat in an instant. It’s subtle, of course; their sessions are recorded, sometimes even watched, so Chilton can’t say anything

outright. He just sounds like a therapist trying to understand his patient, not someone offering silent warnings.

Chilton wants him to comply, to spill whatever material the psychiatrist can feed into likeminded company so he can impress them.

Will knows his next action will come back to bite him in the ass, and knows that it'll just be done out of spite.

He finds that he really doesn't care.

"I've never found people to be very stimulating." Will doesn't meet Chilton's eyes, but his gaze passes over him, for once very clearly unimpressed.

Chilton looks at him, uncrosses his legs and sits up a bit taller. "If that's preferable," he says, every word a chip of ice. "I'll see what I can do for you."

Chilton stands. He waits for a moment, staring, and in the next, he strides right out of the room.

He's never been in solitary before.

Sure, it was something that had been threatened a few times when he was younger, but nothing had ever been done. There was too much to risk then, when they didn't know what might negatively affect his more, malleable mind. There'd been no one to try and make a serious or valid case to put him up in some room by himself.

Chilton has acted as that force. He's a professional, after all, and has been working with Will personally longer than any other psychiatrist has while maintaining some semblance of neutrality.

Will doesn't know whether or not Alana might have fought against this course of action. Hell, he doesn't even really know what kind of explanation for this treatment Will gave. All he knows is that he'd all but signed away any argument against it the moment he'd talked back.

They don't go about it as some terrible business; the guards come to his room and inform him of the decision that's been made, and escort him through the halls without fuss. They take him down a different route than he's used to, Will falling behind the two just a bit to follow their lead.

One opens the door to a small, white, cushioned room, and the other gives him a gentle nudge to enter. He does so, looking around his new, temporary room as the door is shut behind him. There's no handle on the other side; it's just another cushioned part of the wall, the faint outline of the door just barely visible.

The room is large enough for him to lay down across the floor without a problem. It's not nearly as big as his own quarters, but Will hadn't been expecting some grand space to spend

his time.

How long will he be in there for? It's an important question, but not one he'd thought to ask. Even if he had, he doubted if the guards knew. Knowing Chilton, he'd likely asked for a week of solitary. Knowing Jack, he'd probably only given it a few days.

There are ways Will can bide his time. This isn't his first case of dealing with boredom, and it won't be his last.

One important thing he'd also forgotten:

Clocks.

There were no clocks in the room.

Though Will worked entirely off of artificial light, he was still able to understand what time it was. It's hard to tell when hours pass, Will making guesses when it feels about right.

He spends what he thinks is the first two hours inspecting the room thoroughly, finding that there might be a small slot at the very bottom of the door, and that there is, in fact, a small metallic bowl he's supposed to relieve himself in.

It's demeaning, and he feels it right to feel more than a little indignant about his treatment, but he settles, choosing to experiment and see which corner of the room is most comfortable to sit.

It's mindless activities, but it keeps him occupied all the same.

A day passes.

At least, he thinks it's a day. After what was possibly six hours of doing nothing, Will decided to sleep. He doesn't know how much time has been lost, but he feels well rested, so he assumes it must be five hours, maybe four. There is nothing further that he can investigate about the room, so he sits, trying to reach out into the halls to find any sort of emotion.

He finds nothing.

Sometimes, it's hard to pinpoint someone's feelings if they were in a different room. Without seeing them, it was harder to understand. But *this*—it's different. It's a dead buzz, nothing filtering in, nothing coming out.

He's on radio silence.

He has *never* been on radio silence.

Will stands, moving closer to the door, pressing his hand on the cushioned wall. He reaches out again, casting a line and hoping to reel someone back in.

All he can feel is his own anxiety, rising with each moment.

It takes around thirty minutes of distress and pacing before he comes to the conclusion that nothing is wrong with him, but it's the room that's causing this sudden emotional blackout.

It's not frightening, but it is concerning. Will hasn't been left without his powers before; he's always heard and felt and tasted the feedback of others, even if he didn't want to. It was simply a background noise, buzzing comfortably in the back of his head, waiting for him to pick up a thread and follow it if he wanted.

Will does what he thinks is best, and takes a nap before he overthinks anything more. When he wakes, there is a tray of food laid out on the cushions, in front of the slot he'd found.

He eats, and listens to the sound of his own heartbeat.

Will misses his bed. He misses his TV, and his clock, and his computer that sends him warnings about restricted sites. He especially misses being able to turn the lights off, the one thing he'd hardly ever considered to be a privilege.

He curls on the ground and presses a hand to his heart, listening carefully, feeling the pounding inside his own chest. He listens to the loop of his own boredom and anxiety playing back at him, tasting copper in his mouth after too long of doing so. He needs to feel something, though.

He runs his hands over each other, allows his fingers to press and prod at his face, combing them through his hair and giving tiny tugs.

It's been two days.

He has nightmares. It isn't new.

(he chooses to ignore how he wakes up shaking)

(blood seeps through his clothes. It feels like a dream. He knows, in a way, it's not)

He finds a hobby in moving.

Will stretches, shaking out his legs, his limbs, his whole body. He cracks his knuckles and his joints. He smooths his hair and then ruffles it. He clutches his sides, rubbing up and down his

arms like he's cold. All of it helps, in little ways.

When he lays down, he shakes his legs till he falls asleep, knowing he'll wake up to food every time.

There isn't much to do, but he's managing.

His nightmares get worse.

His shirt is left discarded in the corner near the piss bowl, drenched and stinking with sweat.

It's been three days.

(he's able to watch Abigail grow, nurturing his daughter and the monster inside of him at the same time. His desires are secondary, while she is young; they will consume him later, when he can't stand the sight of her brown hair and fair skin, when he will need to destroy what he has created)

Will spends most of his days laying down, falling in and out of consciousness. It feels like he's missing a limb, his senses dulled without anyone to reach out to.

He tries to sleep when his mind goes numb.

He fails.

(Garret Jacob Hobbs waits for him down every corridor of the house he never lived in, but knows every nook and cranny of. He extends a hand, a shadow reaching out across the way. Will stays steady in his spot)

He doesn't have to be sleeping to see Hobbs anymore.

See? He says, over and over, in the same gasping tone. Hunger lies beneath it. *See?*

Will wishes he didn't.

He sits and listens to the ramblings of a memory come to life, skin gray and eyes a cloudy blue.

Will claws at his scalp, as if it'll somehow release this ghost from his head.

His world has spiraled out of control entirely by the time someone decides to open the door.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to dump on me for literally being the worst to my darling Will. I probably deserve it.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> "So. We have what's possibly a group of meta-humans that has a contact within a very, very secretive branch of the government, that's communicating with other meta-humans about plans that not even the fucking president knew about?"
>
> Price swallows thickly. "....Well. When you put it like that, it sounds pretty bad."

Chapter Notes

> I call this chapter "Let Jack Say Fuck"
>
> I also call this chapter "I'm Gonna Finish What I Started Even If It Kills Me"

Jack has barely managed to keep the phone calls away by the time he actually leaves the facility to do a few press conferences.

It's not really in his best interest to leave, really. Will is teetering a rather dangerous line when it came to his stability- something that was perfectly understandable, really, especially after witnessing the gore firsthand, but he doesn't have a choice. He's being called by the public, reeled out from the safety of his office and into the spotlight. It's not a place he's necessarily unused to, of course. He's had his encounters here or there when it was a mess that could've been easily swept under the carpet with a single feature on a relatively big news station.

He needs a carpet the size of a football field if he ever wants to just sweep this mess away.

He leaves on a rather sour note, much to his own dismay. Frederick is somehow certain that solitary confinement will somehow help Will's own trauma. "He's an empath- all the stress he's feeling is just amplified by the people around him," he'd explained. "He needs some time for himself. Real-time, without the ripple of others. Will told me himself that he wanted to do this." Fredrick had smiled, then, his smug, toothless little smile. "He'll be perfectly comfortable. I'll see to his needs myself."

Jack hadn't had the time then to ask Will himself if any of that was true, already half-packed and ready to fly off to Washington. He still doesn't have the energy to try and see if there might've been some ulterior motive on Chilton's part (because even if he was government assigned, Jack still trusted him about as far as he could throw him). He elects to worry about

it all later when he has a clear mind and isn't being rushed around in cars and sleeping in hotel rooms.

He straightens the collar of his shirt, trying to make everything neat and presentable. There's a moment taken to look over the deep lines cutting his face from age and stress before he moves on, out the door and from the hotel, into a dark with even more darkly tinted windows.

The base in Washington isn't really much to look at. Once they're taken past the security check, it's almost all parking lot, save for a small building dotting the middle. It's unassuming, painted a dull beige color with one entrance and one exit. Another security guard stands at the front, dressed as plainly as the others. Jack knows by now that this is not the only man there to protect the assets inside- he's just the only one that can be seen.

"Crawford," he says simply, presenting his ID. The guard looks him over, absently checking at a square device on his belt. He waits for the small, yellow light on the front to flash a solid green before allowing Jack to pass. Two women working a small desk ignore him completely as he goes by, only offering a glance as he calls for the elevator at the back of the room, and then down he goes.

The rest of this facility sprawls deeply underground, twisting around in different levels like an ant hill, lab assistants and scientists scurrying around between each to get their work done. Jack's been here far too many times to be really impressed by it anymore, having to come down for updates, offer updates from Chilton's observations on how Will is doing, and do the occasional escort of the body bags that pass through his own base.

He watches the top of the sliding doors as -45 turns to -46, the elevator letting out a cheery *ding* before opening up. The hallway almost entirely made up of metal, Jack's footsteps echoing deeply throughout it as he makes his way to the door at the very end. There is already someone standing there to welcome him, offering a nod as he presents his ID once more, and steps inside.

He doesn't wait for any greeting, entering the room and setting his eyes on what's laid out on the table. "What do we have?"

"Hello to you too," Katz says. She's standing opposite to him. She looks him over, eyes narrowing. "You said you'd bring coffee." Katz turns over her shoulder. "Didn't he say he'd bring coffee?"

"That he did," Price says, not even turning away from the screen in front of him. "I asked for vanilla iced, and you asked for-"

Jack's quick to interrupt. "I *really* don't think your morning fixes take priority over your jobs."

Katz raises her hands in defeat, seeming to realize then that he is in no mood to play here. "Okay, okay," she concedes. As soon as she drops her hands, it's back to business, the agent moving across the table and sliding a few papers his way. "We looked into Hobbs' past a little further. No mention of any kind of government affiliation, no record of military service, so he

couldn't have gotten any tips on what was coming from here, at least. He couldn't have figured it out himself- the autopsy didn't show any mutations involving telepathy, so we had to rule that out as a possibility."

"But," Price chimes in. "I did a check over his phone records. Nothing on his personal cell, but the home phone- that's where it hit. One incoming call, blocked number, that came in only fifteen minutes before Katz and her team arrived." His chair turns to face the two with a smile. "Ring ring ring, we've got a lead."

The news takes some weight off of Jack's shoulders. "And you've traced it?"

"Not exactly," Price turns back around, typing something out. "Something with the connection wasn't right. And this isn't just standard jamming I'm talking about, this is something else. I'd say some new kind of tech, but maybe that's just me- I watched some James Bond last night, sue me for trying to fantasize a little." He says. "Best theory at this point it meta-human interference. We've seen ones that allow for manipulation of different frequencies, so it isn't a stretch."

"Meta-humans helping meta-humans," Katz says. “Also something we've seen before."

Jack frowns, shaking his head. "We've seen them in small, underground formations. They didn't have the resources to get information on covert missions. The most they wanted to do was get across the border." He gives a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose with some hope that it would somehow alleviate his own headache. There’s still a way to fix this; they always find a way to fix it. "Price, tell me you at least got a location from all this?"

"Yup. I couldn't get anything precise, but I did manage to pinpoint that the call was coming from somewhere in Italy." At the look Jack gives him, Price offers a helpless shrug. "At least it's a small country?"

That heavy weight fell right back on Jack's shoulders. "So. We have what's possibly a group of meta-humans that has a contact within a very, very secretive branch of the government, that's communicating with other meta-humans about plans that not even the fucking president knew about?"

Price swallows thickly. "....Well. When you put it like that, it sounds pretty bad."

"We're working on it." Katz moves towards him an inch, apparently trying to reassure him. "We're going to send out a team to investigate. The Italian government is cooperating with our efforts on it. In a week or two, we'll find the bastard that did this."

Really, it's not much. There's no guarantee that they'll find anything. It's been too long, and whoever has done this has too many connections to be stupid enough to just stay in one spot. But Jack has to keep some kind of hope for this shit storm to pass, and taking Beverly's words are better than nothing. Besides, he has to remember that everyone here is working their damndest to get everything back on track. It's a little more comforting, if a little selfish, to recognize that he's not the only one feeling pressure.

"Okay, okay." Jack nods. Katz offers him a grin and hands him off a folder of their findings. Though he'd rather stay, there's really no time to chat. He was other things he has to move onto, other people to meet that will be less pleasant than the two agents.

He turns to leave but pauses. There's a thought, something he's only had a few updates on, something that's been nagging at him for a little too long- "Katz?" She'd put her attention on Price and whatever it is that he's working on, though looks to him with a curious hum. "Have you seen the girl?"

Katz's attention is on him fully at that; even Jimmy turns a little, glancing at her with a little bit of frightened expectation. Katz nods. "She's doing pretty well. The lab boys aren't poking around too much."

That's not exactly reassuring. Jack has read the reports of when their former team had run their tests on Will and knows exactly what 'poking around' really means. It isn't his business, though; she isn't on his list of responsibilities, and he's not about to put her on there because of some misplaced concern. He offers Katz his thanks and walks away, out of the room, leaving any thoughts about Abigail in the room behind him.

He goes down another few levels, walking out onto level -53 with a folder tucked under his arm. The next meeting he has isn't very exciting, Jack only being told the details of his next few press conferences, and the moves going forwards.

It feels demeaning, in a way. He's had his own agency for some time now, able to move pieces around as he pleases. It had been necessary for his work. Meta-humans are a force that no one quite understands just yet, and so the government had allowed him room to expand, to try and get a grip on what could and could not be done. Jack had probably been too excited in his own game, wanting to test new waters without thinking of the unpredictability of the ocean. They were showing him his place now, allowing him to see exactly where he fell on the food chain.

In short: he'd fucked up, and he was getting one hell of a timeout.

"This can and will be cleared up, Crawford." One of the chairmen says as the rest depart, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Some blogger with a terrible imagination isn't going to wipe you from all your operations."

Jack offers him a smile and his thanks, waving him off all the while knowing that single blogger can and very likely will wipe away any trust that the public or his superiors have in him.

“How many more of these do we have to go through?”

The woman fixing his tie (her name is Anne, he thinks- it'd been hard to catch amongst the cluster of guards and reporters) meets his eyes for a second. “As many as we have to till they’re satisfied.”

“Why couldn’t we just get our public relations people on this?” Jack looks down as Anne steps back. He fixes the tie himself, loosening it some. Anne twitches slightly but says nothing about her now mussed work.

“We already had them on. The people want to speak to the man in charge, apparently. It’s easier for you to dodge questions when you’re not actually here.”

Jack lets out a small hum of understanding, but nothing more. He thinks briefly back to what he’s left behind, down to the very source of their problems. He feels something like worry, but it’s a fleeting thing. He can’t allow his mind to wander. Not right now.

Anne looks him over twice before turning to a man further back, offering a thumbs up before looking back. “Stick to the script. If anyone asks questions that hit too close, redirect them. It’s all just fluffy politics at this point.”

Jack frowns. “I’m not a politician.”

“True,” She says. “But you work for the government. Lying your ass off should be instinct by now.”

Anne gives his shoulder a pat, and he can hear the buzz of reporters waiting for him on the other side of the door.

He pushes through and is met with a blaze of camera lights and heavy murmurs. He feels each gaze snap on him, hears the clicks of recorders and pens, ready to get every word (and every mistake).

He gets to the podium, placing his hands down on either side. A speech prepared simply for an introduction to the questions is laid in front of him; he knows it well without even glancing down. He’s read through it in its drafted stages, up until the final edits.

Jack clears his throat. The crowd goes silent.

“On February sixteenth, there was an incident report in Northfield, Minnesota. I ordered a team of my own specialized unit to investigate the area, and to report back any unusual activity that might be present. This was their only assignment.” Jack pauses. “Unfortunately, it appears that the man in question, Garrett Jacob Hobbs, who went under the alias of Matt Small, was informed that we would be arriving. He murdered his spouse, Louise Small, and held his daughter, Abigail Small, in the house as a hostage. Two of my agents stayed with Louise Small, and another went inside to confront Mr. Hobbs.

This agent shot and killed Mr. Hobbs with three bullets before he could bring any harm to his daughter. This course of action was not advised but viewed as a necessary action in order to save the life of Abigail Small, who is currently recovering from her few injuries. These events and the actions of our agents should not be a reflection on how our division works within the realm of the public, and I’d ask you to look on the heroic actions of our people rather than the sensationalized bloodshed.”

It completely ignores every single question that has been tossed around by news stations, lacks the information that he knows each and every reporter there wants to pry out of him. But it's planned and doesn't give them anything to directly go off of, and that's all that could have been done.

There's a pause just as he ends his short speech, a few seconds for every reporter in the room to take in what he's just said before it explodes into a cacophony of questions.

Jack is only barely able to hear himself sigh above it all.

He points out into the crowd, specific enough that a journalist pops up. "While your department did give out the autopsy reports of Mr. Hobbs to the public, no photographic evidence of the crime scene was made public. Is there any reason for secrecy around this?"

"The photos were not made public to maintain privacy for the remaining family members of the Small family," Jack says. "It's also because this is an ongoing investigation. Once we have looked everything over, all evidence will be put on public databases." He leaves no room for further comment, pointing out to the crowd again. "Yes?"

"Will you be releasing the names of the agents that appeared on the scene?"

"No," Jack says, which causes a heavy murmur. Another camera flashes as he raises his hand for some silence. "No, we will not be releasing the names at this time. Again, this is still an open investigation. All information will be given out at a later date."

"Why was Mr. Hobbs being watched in the first place?" A voice rings out from amongst the seated crowd.

"That information is sensitive at this time, but the most I can say is a possible act of terrorism."

He answers several more questions in nearly all the same way; it's just a matter of being vague and recycling the lines he'd been told. The reporters aren't satisfied, and the public won't be either, but it's all he can give.

Jack glances to the side as a reporter speaks, where Anne stands waiting just at the door. She offers just the slightest tilt of her head. It's really just an acknowledgment that he's doing his job, but he takes it as approval.

"-you're department before now?"

Jack blinks, turning his attention towards the crowd. The reporter, a young man in a blue suit, watches him expectantly. "Would you mind repeating?" He asks into the microphone.

"I said," He starts again, sounding slightly annoyed at having to repeat himself. "Why haven't we heard from your department before now?"

"The public *has* heard from our department before," Jack says. "We're not some shadowy organization out of a conspiracy theory. We serve the people and have been active in public before to investigate meta-human activity."

“How many years back was that?” The same reporter barks as soon as he finishes. “Thirty? Forty? Has the department just been dormant since then?” The reporter doesn’t allow Jack to speak again, even as he calls for quiet. “The Meta-Human Containment Program has been linked to the disappearances of thirteen U.S citizens over the past six years—is this your way of serving the people? By kidnapping them and sending false reports to their families?”

The cameras have turned to the reporter now, others quick to scratch down notes or press their recorders towards their peer.

Jack can feel Anne’s stare burning into his shoulder as he speaks. “Sir, I’ll have to ask you to sit down-“

“I think the public deserves to know the truth-“

“-and let someone else ask their *questions.“*

The journalist stands to his feet. “-about your underground operations-“

“Sir, *would you please-“*

“-with meta-human soldiers that you pluck from their own homes to work under your command!" The journalist is stepping away from his seat, closer towards the podium. He turns back to the crowd, ignoring Jack's protests for him to sit back *down.* "Jack Crawford is leading the public further into his and the governments lies! Freddie Lounds has been investigating their crimes, and-!"

Anne has called upon security already, two guards coming from either side to pull him away. He's left to rant on as he's taken, cameras flashing as he goes. Jack feels his mind go blank for a second with something like panic, practically watching the questions start to fill up the room as reporters turn to him for some kind of comment, silent but expectant. He doesn't need to look to the side for advice, knowing well that the best way to handle this is to ignore it. So he does, clearing his throat and apologizing, and moves on with the conference.

His time is cut short for convenience, each journalist calling for his attention even as he moves back from the podium, into the waiting and very aggravated presence of Anne. She is facing down one of the security guards to his right. "I thought I said serious checks, no one from Tattle Conspiracy was supposed to be here-"

The guard makes a few lame excuses, trying to make her understand that the ID had looked authentic, that everything had seemed to check out; Jack doesn't bother to try and hear the rest, knowing he's got to get going soon before reporters find where the car is parked and swarm him outside. He makes it out, but just barely, Anne only managing to slam the door shut before a wave of photographers is over them.

She sits there on her phone, typing something out at a furious pace. He sits and fiddles with his sleeve for a moment before addressing her. "Tattle Conspiracy got in?" He already knows the answer to that one.

"Apparently" Anne doesn't look up from her phone as she speaks. "It's fine, though. He's had his name attached to Lounds, and sneaking into a conference like that just to create some chaos? Anything he said will be irrelevant to the public." She shakes her head. "Maybe a video of the outburst will go viral, but overall, he'll end up just being another nut waving around conspiracy theories."

Jack turns, looking out the window. He sees some protestors that are wrapping around the sidewalk from the conference center. Their signs vary from vaguely pro-meta-human to completely anti-government (well, at least anti-his branch of the government). His gaze flicks over the crowd, noting with some kind of relief it's spread pretty thin, before their own out sight completely.

"Not addressing Lounds is still probably the best way of going about it. Giving her anymore traction would just worsen the situation, honestly." Anne says. "Even saying her name would give her following some reason to think that we believe she's a threat."

"Isn't she?"

Anne sets her phone down on her thigh, looking at him seriously. "Not if we don't want her to be."

He should just be settled with that response, but there's just something that isn't sitting well with him in it, something that he can't help but address- "You said, it's probably the best way of going about it." His brow furrows. "What do you mean by 'probably'?"

There's a second of hesitation before Anne picks her phone right back up. The pace of her texting is much more relaxed than before. "I meant that she's claiming to know something about the case that the U.S government doesn't."

As Anne goes on about how even for Lounds, it's ridiculous to even claim something like that, Jack's phone buzzes in his pocket. There's a flash of Alana's name before he declines. He assumes she's just seen what went down, and he doesn't particularly feel like getting some kind of lecture from an employee when he knows he'll be hearing something harsh when he gets back to base. Jack turns back to Anne. "What's she talking about now?"

"That it's part of something bigger. Meta-human revolutions are going to start around the globe, basically talking about some genetic war." Anne shrugs. "And she's basing all of her claims off of some anonymous tip. I thought she might've just been doing all of this for her five minutes of fame, but Christ, her fans might've rubbed some of the crazy off on her."

As his mind turns around rapidly, trying to find something solid to hold onto, Jack hummed a distant agreement. He doesn't speak even as the car rounds back up to his hotel to drop him. He doesn't sigh or groan as he enters his room, doesn't look in the mirror to check if there are any new wrinkles or if there's a new spot of grey creeping up on his hairline. Jack slips off his shoes and jacket and settles down to his computer.

Tattle Conspiracy really isn't much to look at. Honestly, he didn't know what he'd been expecting. Maybe some cheesy designs of UFO's, some large signs of announcing Freddie's absolute distrust for the government, possibly even something to do with lizard people. But

it's all relatively normal, just like when he'd first seen it. It's just her writing that inflates everything, causes the drama he's currently dealing with. He's sure there'll be a new story up by midnight about the conference complaining about censorship of important information.

Jack scours the page for a moment longer before finding the article. It's only three days old. *THE NEXT WAR ISN'T FOUGHT WITH GUNS - IT'S WITH DNA*.

He tries to read through it quickly, pick out what's actually important amongst all the inflammatory language and buzzwords. She talks of governments arming themselves with meta-humans, of meta-humans gathering together to form something beyond underground safehouses (and it all goes beyond a simple crime scene and a picture of an unknown man, which honestly worries some part of Jack). Only at the end is an anonymous tip thanked for this insight, Freddie vowing to keep their location disclosed if they choose to come forward with more information in the future.

It feels just a little stupid to turn over the thought that this tip didn't just come from some nut who's obsession with conspiracy theories have gone too far, but Jack can't help it. No one knows about the call, the possibility of meta-human interferences on the investigation. To have this come out when he's only just gotten a hold of this information- it doesn't sit right with him. Freddie's always been eager to get on top of a case, but she isn't desperate enough to post something without some kind of evidence to back it up.

Jack settles back into his chair, staring at the screen thoughtfully. It feels like he's steering a sinking ship, every plan that he's turning round in his head half-formed and unwise, all of them probably leading to more distrust from the public and his own branch.

Probably.

When he pulls his phone out from his pocket, he reads three different voicemails from Alana. Something heavy drops in his stomach, but he ignores them. When he gets back, he can deal with her disappointment in him for leaving on such short notice only to have some terribly run conferences.

He pulls back on his suit jacket and calls for a car. As soon as he gets to the base, he sends out his order. There'll be backlash for it, sure, but he doesn't care. This is no longer politics, it's personal, and Jack is giving the only reaction he sees fit for the situation. His mind is made up.

It's only right to grab the person who blew holes in the side of his ship and drag them right down to the bottom of the ocean with him.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The teacup has yet to be shattered.

Chapter Notes

Two updates in two days?? whhaaaaat? Crazy, I know

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On a much brighter day (miles and miles away from a panicked Dr. Bloom, a determined Crawford and a fuming public) a teapot whistles.

The hands that take it up are gentle and calloused, the fine hair of arms suddenly exposed to the warm Italian sun as the pot is brought to the balcony. There, a small table is set; fine cheeses have been artfully spread on a wooden board, a bowl of grapes placed beside it. On a different tray, there are cubed meats stacked neatly on top of another. When the pot is brought to the table, the fine china set is complete. Two cups of tea are poured.

The couple (not tied together by any romantic means necessarily, but by a bond of survival and intrigue) sit and dine, their casual conversation carried over the sweet songs of birds and the burble of activity from the street below. Another pair of hands, manicured and thin, take the cheese knife. Never once have they touched the meat.

"Lovely day," she says, taking a sip of her tea. A bird flies low, settling into its rooftop nest across the way, setting and resetting odd twigs, plucking its own feathers out to truly make it a home.

There is a hum as he looks down at his phone. A news alert passes over the screen, a blip in their morning and little else. It reads only: *Freddie Lounds Arrested Along With Colleague For White House Security Breach - Live Updates.*

A smile curls onto his face, light but transformative. He looks out to the horizon, beyond the seas separating them, and says, "A lovely day indeed."

Chapter End Notes

I had to break this apart from the last chapter. It just felt right to give you-know-who his own little space to be....well, Him

also writing a tiny chapter amongst all of the other bad boys is the most freeing thing I'll just tell y'all that

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will takes a chance and looks down at himself. The jumpsuit is gone, his pale skin free for the world around him. Little scars speckle the flesh here and there, evidence of experimentation in action. He runs his hands over his sides, just to see if they might pass through and touch his ribs, or maybe his lungs, or maybe nothing at all.

Will is solid.

He's pretty sure he's the only thing in this world that is.

Chapter Notes

We're bringing this bad boy into 2019! It's a slow train but....we're getting there people

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's in a void.

It isn't a scary floating aimlessly, untethered by gravity is actually a rather nice experience. He flexes his fingers gently, testing each digit individually. It's an unconscious motion, just to see if his body is still there (unfortunately, it is, but he doesn't take any time to really wallow over that fact). He turns his head (another test), all he sees is a muted white. It's bright but not shining, slightly hard on the eyes. Any kind of pain is helpful to keep him grounded in this experience, though, so he's grateful (even if he doesn't yet understand what this 'experience' is).

Will takes a chance and looks down at himself. The jumpsuit is gone, his pale skin free for the world around him. Little scars speckle the flesh here and there, evidence of experimentation in action. He runs his hands over his sides, just to see if they might pass through and touch his ribs, or maybe his lungs, or maybe nothing at all.

Will is solid.

He's pretty sure he's the only thing in this world that is.

(His exposure feels like a gesture in this passive existence. It feels like something to be noted)

Something brushes past his leg, his hip, leading to a shadow of a touch against his arm. He doesn't fight it. Laid bare, he is anything but vulnerable. Like this, he's not a man. He is a

weapon.

That touch retreats. The air shifts around him, turning him to its wind.

A voice, barely above a whisper, speaks out. Oh, *it says.* That's interesting.

As soon as he opens his eyes, he wishes he hadn't. Gone was that hazy void, infinite and yet so finite space; in its place were harsh lights and a terribly loud beeping sound that he recognized as his heartbeat. The bed beneath him wasn't nearly as comfortable as his former vast nothingness, a little stiff on his back and itchy when his fingers twitched over the material.

Will blinked once, then twice, the lids feeling almost tacked together for a few moments. He did a cursory sweep around, recognizing the med-lab immediately. Most of it was just stainless steel, unused for the most part as Will had never had any real emergencies. The few times he'd been in here had just been to get band-aids for papercuts or for his own yearly check-up. It's not exactly a comforting sight, but he supposes it's better than padded walls.

As his senses clear, Will is able to hear a conversation that was once muffled by the hum of machines and the incessant beeping. He turns his head some, pinpointing the spot where it's coming from.

He's not surprised to see Chilton there; he'd known that once the stint in solitary ended, the man would be right there at his bedside. He'd feign concern, knowing well that Will would be the only one able to feel his smugness, the subtle gloating, all the while knowing that he couldn't say a damn thing about it. He's not necessarily surprised by Alana's presence either. Her worry for his well-being was genuine (or as genuine as it could get in a place like this). He just hadn't thought they'd be there at the same time.

It probably would have been better if they hadn't. He can really only catch a few bits and pieces of their current conversation, but it doesn't sound very pleasant; all of Alana's words are coming out with the tone of a warning, Chilton attempting to appease and soften her current rage.

Something sparks in Will then. It doesn't slink out as he expects, as he’s used to his ability working; it's a violent action, bursting from him in a way that makes Will feel almost breathless.

A beast moves hungrily towards the first thing it feels: *Anger-anger-pain-anger.* It stalks those last few inches closer, ready to unsheathe its claws and bare its teeth, breathing down her neck, *ready to take all that can be given-*

Alana stiffens, whipping around to stare at the cot. "Will?"

And he’s back in his body. He lets out a sound that's caught between a greeting and a grunt, shifting to sit upright. She's over to his bedside with just a few quick steps. The relief dripping off of her makes him slump a little.

When he looks at her, she offers him a slight smile. "How are you feeling?"

He ignores her question. If she's been tracking his state at all, she probably already knows how to answer it herself. "How long have I been out?" His lips almost crack when they move. His mouth feels like it's full of cotton.

"Two days," Chilton finally takes a step forwards. He seems unsure whether he'll be welcome any closer. "Don't worry- you haven't missed much." He sounds a little sarcastic, the edge of his mouth twitching upwards.

Alana turns to look over her shoulder. Will doesn't need to be an empath to feel the hostility bouncing off of one another, seeing the traces of it on her face when she looks back to him. "You were catatonic when they opened the door." She explains. "Physically you were fine, but mentally....we couldn't be sure. With the nature of your powers and how your psyche might've been affected, you coming back to the real world was a waiting game."

Will hums in response, unsure of what he should feel. There's a sort of numbness that comes with the knowledge. He doesn't push to see if he'll find anything within it. "Didn't mean to give you a scare," his words sound hollow, and the grin he gives her is even more so.

"Just don't do it again, alright?" Alana's smile is a reflection of his own, but she offers his shoulder a squeeze.

His eyes fix onto Chilton, steely and challenging. Chilton takes a moment to look almost perturbed before falling back to his usual smarmy poker face. It's possibly the first time he's actually known where Will's been staring. It's most definitely the first time he's felt the weight of Will's gaze.

He's almost tempted to keep staring, just to see if Chilton might physically start to shy away. He doesn't. There are more important things to do; he's already made a mental checklist of important things to question since he's been on his little comatose vacation. "Is Jack back yet?"

“No-“ Alana starts. Her voice is soft, about to guide him gently through some kind of bad news.

Chilton is almost too quick to cut through her sugary delivery. “He’s been out of office. He’ll probably be out for some time, considering he decided to conduct an investigation on Ms. Lounds.”

It takes half a second for that news to hit him, and another for the implications to come crashing in right after. *“Lounds?”* He echoes back, eyes flicking from Chilton to Alana. “You mean Freddie Lounds?” Will pushes himself up a little, his body crying out against the sudden motion. “Why the hell would he go after her?”

Her work had been inflammatory, intentionally and rather passionately fanning at the flames of Will's mysterious appearance and the public panic that came thereafter. But none of it had seemed worthy of an investigation or arrest; it'd only been pandering for conspiracy theorists and the paranoid as far as Will had seen.

"She had an inside man in one of the press conferences. She isn't being investigated for her website." Alana says. She pauses, seems to consider her words, then adds, "That's what it says officially, at least."

Will can't help but snort. "He wouldn't waste an opportunity like this. But how's the public taking it?"

"Her cult following seems to believe her right to free speech is being stripped away," Chilton says. "There's been a few scattered protests. Nothing big."

But it's still backlash, Will thinks as he lets out a hum.

It's going to branch out from a handful of demonstrations- all three of them have to know that. Or at least Will hopes that he isn't the only one to think this. Maybe he's putting too much faith in the people who've been essentially managing his whole life since he'd been picked up and thrown into the system.

Alana seems to see the cogs turning in his head, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving him a reassuring look. "We're managing it. Jack isn't going to keep her for long."

"She'll make a fuss when she gets out. Probably write a tell-all book about the whole thing." Will snorts at the idea of her face on the front cover, bold and holding on tightly to her victimhood. Maybe she would fall into every cliché and decide to put a tattered flag right behind her.

Alana's touch retreats. "She might-"

"She *will."*

"-but that isn't our concern right now. It's especially not your concern. All you should be thinking of right now is recovering."

Recovering from *what,* Will wants to ask. He still isn't sure what the hell happened to his head or why it still felt like there was some slithering *thing* lying dormant beneath his skin.

He doesn't say anything, though. Just sighs and presses his head back hard enough that the pillows downy sides muffle some of the sounds around him. Alana seems satisfied with that, gaze sliding over to Chilton. He offers a nod and his lips move around some kind of farewell before he slides out of the room.

It's silent for a few moments. There's only the hum of machines and the steady beat of the monitor next to him. He lifts his head some from the pillow to listen.

"So," Alana says. Her voice somehow fits with all the rhythmic droning. "You pissed him off."

Will lets out a soft, humorless chuckle. “Yeah.”

“Intentionally?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought so.” Her lips purse, struggling to hold in another heavy sigh. “You need to work on your self-preservation skills.”

“Pretty sure I don’t have any.” Will says.

“Then find some.”

Alana’s tone doesn’t leave him with much room to argue. He doesn’t even feel like it leaves room for some snort and snide remark. Her agitation is subtle underneath the rolling waves of her concern, but it’s still there.

He’s fine with kicking Chilton around, or fine enough that he’d take another round in solitary just to see him twitch. But Alana—

Alana is his friend. His *only* friend.

“I won’t poke at him again”

Alana frowns, skeptical. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

Alana appears satisfied with this scrap, relief soothing itself over her anxieties like a balm. She finally settles into her seat. “Jack's going to want to know you’re awake. Technically, I don’t *have* to tell him right away…”

“It’s okay. He’s dealing with Lounds. Knowing I’m actually conscious and not a vegetable will give him something to check off his very long list of worries.”

She smiles. “Thanks. He’s…” She takes a second to search for the right word. “…he’s working the situation as best as he can.” Another second taken for thought. “It isn’t going well.”

“He’s been working the Small case, the press, Lounds…” Will gives a one-shoulder shrug. “It’s a lot to juggle for one man.”

“It’s his job.” Alana turns icy again. “He should know how to handle it by now.”

“You’re not on good terms right now?” His tone comes out as more of a statement than a question, but it’s only because he already knows the answer. A little shuffling and he’s back up on his elbows, his joints still a little stiff. “If it’s about the field mission still—”

“It’s not just that. Him being eager to get you into the world is one thing. But the disregard for your safety—” She shakes her head, brows stitched together. “Not only then, but now. He

didn't even try to check with you, just took Chilton's word and put you in solitary confinement. How could he even think that would be helpful for someone of your abilities?"

He's able to actually breathe in her frustration at this point, the feeling rattling around in his head when he shifts in his cot. "Alana. I'm *fine."*

"For right now."

Will has never been in the habit of reassuring others. He's never needed to. Honestly, the past few minutes of convincing Alana that he isn't on his deathbed have given him more experience in comforting others than the last few years of his life. He's entirely uncomfortable, unsure of if he's doing it right or if he should even keep trying at it.

He goes for a comfortable compromise. "Let's just focus on the present. The future's a little too much for me to think about right now."

She leaves it at that. There's another silence before a more trivial conversation starts; how she's been, how Margot is, the place they're going to get soon. Will listens and nods and pretends to have some frame of reference of what real life is like until she has to leave to take a call.

Alana doesn't come back after that. Nurses filter in and out of the room every now and again to check on him. They don't really speak, always keeping a careful distance, and makes an obvious point of absolutely not touching him.

It continues on for a couple days just like that. He doesn't see Alana or Jack or Chilton during any of this. He isn't particularly bothered by that; it's better to recover in peace rather than being coddled or prodded at, but still. It makes him feel almost antsy not knowing what's going on (he can't even try to look it up in here, unable to have access to his computer or even a TV).

He waits patiently until they clear him, satisfied with his stability for now. His room is just as it was when he left, but he knows it isn't untouched. They had to have had someone come through to inspect his things as soon as he'd gone under. He doesn't mind it; he's used to having his things searched. At least they're decent enough to set everything back now.

The first thing he goes for is his computer and try to get to Tattle Conspiracy. Will finds that the site is blocked from his access, but he isn't surprised. There'd been a little leniency with his internet freedom before, but now? They'd be putting everything under lock and key.

He leans back in his chair and sighs, his fingers playing with each other in a fidgety sort of way. His mind wanders then, wondering where Jack might be, what Alana's doing, the like.

Normally, zoning out would give his abilities time to smooth back out over the facility. He's kept them reigned in relatively well for the past few days; the experience in solitary and the small incident with Alana have made it feel a little safer to keep everything sealed tight.

He tries to relax his shoulders, tentatively taking down a few of the barriers he's created over his own mind. The morphing mass behind them shifts and begins to spread out beyond him,

past the walls—

and then it hiccups.

It's a small thing, like a bump in a carpet or bubbling wallpaper. It doesn't make Will do anything besides twitch a little. With a little more concentration put to work, everything smooths itself out, continuing to unravel till his senses go out of range.

Will sits with this second incident for a moment longer before going and grabbing a small box from under his bed, pulling out his gloves. They slip onto his hands easily, the leather wrinkling when he bends his fingers.

It's stupid to feel safe with them on. He's told himself this time and time again. After all, they do nothing but muffle just a fraction of that terrible thing inside of Will. He could just as easily kill someone with his arm or leg or even his pinky toe. Every rational, angry part of him slams the same fact into him every time he slides them on alone: *they do nothing.*

It doesn't stop him from laying out on the bed, fingers rubbing against one another, the sound of leather rubbing against leather becoming tangled with his own breathing.

Chapter End Notes

Okay now I just wanted to say sorry for a bit of a boring (and kind of short) chapter. Like I said: slow train. Things will pick up, juuuust not quite yet

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> There's no fanfare about leaving. It's not a big dramatic moment like he'd imagined. It's just a short walk to the vehicle waiting there for him; there are a few moments of pause in the process as he gets settled beside Alana inside the truck before the engine rumbles to life, and then they're off.
>
> It's an unusually boring end to such a large chapter in his life. Will's not about to complain about it, but in a way, it just seems wrong.

Everywhere Will turns, Lounds shows up. Everyone who's anyone is talking about the case: news networks, talk-show hosts, political commentators. Her reputation is moving in waves from a defamed journalist stirring the pot or a true patriot trying to dig up the truth for the American people. Her face is *everywhere.*

He imagines it must be pretty hard trying to find a cell that can fit her growing ego.

His own is growing quite small because of it. The amount of tension building up in the place is starting to suffocate him. With all of Lounds work being called into question, people are keeping a rather close eye on all of M.C.P's past activities and an even closer one on their recent endeavors to avoid any question to do with meta-humans. Jack is replaced by a bland PR woman who delivers no answers and pivots half of the time she's on camera.

It's a mess to watch, but it's impossible to avoid when he's trying to pass the time. And… well, there's a lot to pass. Alana's visits are growing thin as she's taken in and out for debriefing and Chilton's distanced himself from the drama again once everyone became sure Will was nice and lucid.

It feels like he's transported back to when this whole thing started, waiting something to break. It's not too long of a wait, thankfully; only a week into his boredom does Alana finally come for another visit.

It's at some time in the afternoon that the soft three knocks come. Wil, who'd been trying to pick out constellations from the bumpy little marks on his ceiling, sits up in his bed in wait. Alana comes through the door quietly, waiting for the cell to shut before looking at him with a tight smile (those are the only kinds she's given him since Lounds arrest).

No greeting is given. Will slides his hands beneath his thighs and Alana settles down on the bed beside him. She's looking down at her hands and Will can't help to stare too. Her fingers are thin and long, delicately laced into one another. His own twitch slightly, half tempted to imitate the gesture.

He breaks the silence. “How’s the house coming along?”

Alana’s smile isn’t tight this time, but it’s definitely humorless. “Not that great. The place’s been swamped with reporters since the new address was leaked. I don’t know how but I have my guesses on who. Margot’s brother is a sadistic son of a bitch. I mean, he practically lives to make her life miserable. What better way to do that than to shut us in our own home?”

“He’s that bad?”

“Worse.”

He lets out a soft kind of laugh and things go silent for a moment longer. It feels strange to talk about all this as friends. Thankfully, Alana doesn’t let that feeling last. “Margot says hello, by the way.”

Margot’s been doing that a lot, apparently. Every time Alana’s visited she’s made a point to deliver Margot’s *hello.* He’s not even sure if it’s real. He doesn’t know the specifics of keeping M.C.P’s operations private when it comes to an agents spouse, but he’s confident that speaking a word of their secret ward is off limits. Will doesn’t press that issue, though.

Will looks to her seriously. “Has Jack said anything?”

There’s been no mention of him at all in their few meetings. Alana talks about anything but him. Will’s allowed it; it’s been a welcome distraction amongst all the Freddie Lounds shit. But he hasn’t seen Jack around the facility or on the screen and he can’t help but feel that he’s due for some kind of update.

There’s an awkward beat. The calm shifts, tumbling around to regain itself. Alana’s expression clamps shut. “Not to me.” She plucks her phone out of her pocket then, sliding through her photos. “Have I shown you the house? We just started moving all the furniture in.“

“Alana.”

“Margot’s better on design than I am. It’s probably from the wealthy upbringing, but the modern look isn’t really my taste.”

“Alana.”

She barely looks at him. The calm hasn’t set into nerves; it’s rippling with annoyance. “He’s not your concern, Will.”

His hands come out from beneath his thighs and curl into fists on the bed. “At least tell me if he’s out of the job or not.” And Will can feel his own anger spiking out past himself, pushing back against Alana. “I have the right to know what the hell is going on here, especially when *I’m* the reason it all started.”

“You’re *not*-“

"Fine. I'm not the reason, Jack is—I don't care where the blame goes anymore. Just tell me what's going on."

Alana's stare is hard on him, but as soon as Will looks, *really* looks, she breaks. Her phone is shoved back inside her pocket, fingers going back to being laced together tightly. Annoyance is ebbing into something darker, but it's not anger. Once again, the air's shifting around to form something new and almost foreboding.

A beat. Alana sighs and then speaks. "He still has his job. He's still handling the Lounds case, but he isn't doing interviews anymore. I assume you already know that." She looks like she wants to say something, but nothing spiteful comes. Alana carries on. "As far as I'm aware, he won't be coming back for some time. There isn't any certain end date to any of this. Lounds' lawyer is saying that she's being wrongfully targeted by certain sects of the government for her pieces on the meta-human crisis. Her followers are flooding around every elected official to get them to spill some kind of statement on the whole fiasco."

She shifts around, just looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "Outside of the public….there are going to be a couple of changes made within the program. Jack's greenlit them for his sector. Other department heads are coming in with their own seals of approval."

"What changes?" He asks even as his mind fills in the blanks in the most terrible of ways.

(Maybe they'd lock him in some dark, secret place; maybe they were going to dump the M.C.P entirely and just kill him to tie up all loose ends; maybe maybe maybe)

"Because of the overwhelming interest from the public, they've decided the best course of action is to abandon the sites and place you all in a more secure area. Together." She pauses, trying to gauge his reaction. "I think it's a good idea, Will. After your episode, I think you could really benefit from socializing with other meta-humans."

Alana goes on to say something about this new bunker, about how it will be nice and new and clean, how she'll be there right along for the ride and a number of other things she probably thinks are reassuring. But Will is stuck on her last two words.

Other meta-humans.

The few times he's met others like him, he's killed them. He's watched them weep and struggle and cry out in fear. He's seen their lives flash before his eyes and is forced to hold their memories afterward. Will had never even uttered a word to any of them—he'd just done his job. That was all he thought he'd ever have to do.

The next slap in the face is the fact that he's going to be *leaving* the facility. The facility where he's spent almost all of his life in, where he's done and seen terrible things. The facility that he thought would inevitably become his own coffin when the time came.

And he's just going to leave.

Alana seems to have finally noticed that he's firmly stuck in his own head. She places a hand on his shoulder tentatively, offering the gentlest of squeezes. "I know what you're thinking

and yes, it's probably going to be a little rough at first. But sometimes change is good. This kind of change is long overdue."

The next three minutes are completely silent. His fingers are skimming over each other slowly as he tries to think of something, anything to say—Alana is looking at his desperately for some kind of confirmation that he understands or that he'll be okay or really just anything. But he doesn't know how to react or how he should react.

He could be happy to be moving. Alana is right to say it's overdue; there'd been several times they'd considered moving him around, though nothing had ever come through. There's also the option to be frightened about what's going to happen. The others might not react well to him if they know who he is and what he's done to their kind. Or maybe he could be sad about it. As clinical and overbearing as the facility was, it was the only home he'd ever really known (or at least the only one he could remember having).

But nothing comes. Just waves upon waves of solemnness break through, interrupting the flat lines of lifeless acceptance.

They just sit there until Alana's hand retreats and she makes to stand. He doesn't realize he's moving until his hand is wrapped around her wrist.

Alana flinches. He's wearing his gloves, he's only touching her sleeve, but she still flinches. He ignores the slight withering feeling in his chest and looks at her. "When?"

Her gaze flicks up from his hand. "Two days." She doesn't talk again until Will's released her wrist. "The agent who escorted you before is going to come by. You remember agent Katz?"

Will nods. "I remember." He hesitates. "….and you'll be there too?"

"The whole way through."

It's not much, but it's all that can be offered. Will gives another nod of understanding and Alana takes it as permission to leave.

He waits out the two days in silent contemplation and some underlying sense of horror.

When Katz comes by, Will's room is barren. They've taken what little possessions he has and transported them already, leaving him with just a bed. When she enters she takes a good look around the room, expression twitching to a soft frown. "They really make it homey for you, huh?"

"There used to be a TV." He nods in the direction of the wall where the mount used to be. They'd taken his computer and TV yesterday. He doubts they're being taken to his new quarters; it'd be easier (and safer) to dispose of them entirely.

Katz pulls out a familiar pair of cuffs. "They let you watch anything interesting?" She comes forwards as Will presents his wrists, locking them in place and bringing him up to his feet

with care. “I usually waste time watching Hallmark movies. They’re so shitty but a good, brain-numbing kind of shitty.”

She takes his arm and leads him into the hallway. The walk feels far too short; Will feels like he’s barely had a proper chance to say goodbye to everything before they’ve reached the exit.

There’s no fanfare about leaving. It’s not a big dramatic moment like he’d imagined. It’s just a short walk to the vehicle waiting there for him; there are a few moments of pause in the process as he gets settled beside Alana inside the truck before the engine rumbles to life, and then they’re off.

It’s an unusually boring end to such a large chapter in his life. Will’s not about to complain about it, but in a way, it just seems wrong.

He forces himself to sleep for most of the ride if only to avoid dwelling on that feeling. The ride feels at least a few hours long; Alana and Katz make polite conversation here and there and several times try to invite Will into it, but he doesn’t take the bait. He doesn’t want to talk to about the new house or about a show. He doesn’t want to talk at all. So, he doesn’t.

There’s a moment before the truck stops that Will finally wonders if this is what his victims had experienced. Riding along in a car restrained, having absolutely no idea what kind of horrible things waited for them ahead.

The doors open and Will is immediately greeted by heavy fluorescent lights. It takes a few blinks for him to get used to them, craning his head to get a good look around as Katz hops out to show proper identification. They’re in a garage of some kind, parked amongst a few rows of identical trucks. The air feels a little stuffy—Will can’t help but wonder if they’ve stuck him in some underground bunker. It’d make for a pretty convenient gravesite if things go south.

“C’mon,” Katz waves a hand at him. Alana helps him to hop out, keeping a steady hand on his shoulder as they walk through the garage. He sees agents lined up along every entrance, heavy weapons in hand, staring them down like hawks as they pass by. Both he and Alana stiffen as they hear the click of the safety trigger come from one of the guards.

As soon as they exit the garage they’re met with a gunmetal gray hallway, Katz leading them up to the door. The pace at which she taps out the code for the keypad lock is too fast for him to possibly hope to memorize, the heavy door whirring before it opens up wide.

And inside it….is not what he expected. Not that Will had had high hopes for anything. His mind had come up with the image of what was essentially a prison, where each meta-human would be caged behind a set of bars to be gawked at like wild animals. There’d be those same blindingly white walls and maze-like hallways with a guard on each corner ready and willing to beat the life out of anyone who even looked at them sideways.

But the first thing he sees is a common area with a clean, wood floor and cream walls, chairs set up at round tables and a shelf of board games set to the side. There’s a TV with a couch set right up in front. There’s no one seated anywhere, not even a flicker of life besides the three of them, but Will can’t help but stare at all of that comfort in alarm.

He turns to Alana just to see her look pretty satisfied with the setup. She smiles at him, taking his surprise as a very good thing. “Pretty nice, huh?”

She must have had something to do with the set-up, then. She’d always been there to make his own quarters filled with as much luxury as the program would allow; of course, she would try and make this a whole glamorized prison unit.

They pass through that common area too, Will noting there’s cushy little rugs set up around the tables and the couch before they come upon one of the three doors along the opposite wall. These too of the same locking mechanism, though Katz’ pattern for a code is different this time (something he just barely manages to see, still far too caught up in the fact that there’s a whole fucking *couch* right there).

The next hallway is exactly the same is the common room before; wooden floors and cream walls and soft lights, metal doors lined up along the walls in an almost pleasingly numbered way.

Only once they’ve really started moving does he notice the little windows on each of the doors that give only a slight peek inside. A few are standing right at it, watching him as he walks. There are several stares that seem wary, though most just appear curious.

Will stretches out his powers tentatively, twitching only once as he comes across a few bumps in his path, letting it all smooth out like a blanket across his new “home”.

They stop as they reach a door marked with a single black dot. Alana finally lets go, but she still keeps close at his side as Katz goes to unlock it. “You’ll be fine,” she says quietly.

He doesn’t understand why she’s trying to comfort him until she walks him inside. A trembling figure sits on one of the beds that Alana introduces as Peter.

“And this is Will Graham,” Alana says in a gentle voice, slow and steady like she’s talking to a child or some animal that might get spooked and run at the slightest sound. “He’s going to be living with you while you’re both here.”

Peter says something under his breath that Will doesn’t quite catch before sticking out his hand. His eyes remain firmly on the floor. “Nice to—nice to meet you, Mister Graham.”

Will’s thrown for a second, standing still till Katz knocks him gently on the back. He takes a step forward, leather glove wrapping around Peter’s twitching hand. “Nice to meet you, too.”

It’s the first time anyone had ever offered him a hand.

Before Alana leaves, she takes him to the side, giving him a rather serious look. “If you need anything, just ask for me. I’ll come as soon as I can.” She tries to catch his gaze. “Okay?”

“Okay.” He says. She manages to get in a final little wave before the door clicks shut.

Peter stares at the floor. Will stares at the wall. It probably looks like a depressing version of a Mexican standoff.

The other man moves suddenly, crouching down so he can reach underneath the bed. Before Will can even question what he's doing, a small, furry little ball curls itself up into Peters hands.

Peter rises, a mouse cupped in his hand. He smiles. "This is Kevin. He lives here too." He says, like it's a perfectly normal thing to do. One hand moves to stroke along the mouse's back and Peter closes his eyes, every motion slightly twitchy. It's only when he turns his head that Will notices the scar running along the side of his skull.

"Um." Will says.

"He came from under there," Peter points to where a small, white cabinet stands. "There's a little hole. I- I covered it so they wouldn't see. He can, uh, still get through, though. Made sure he could."

The mouse is pretty subdued in Peter's hands, looking as comfortable as could be. Will stares at it long enough that it's furry little head turns, whiskers twitching curiously his way.

"They let you move things around?" Will asks instead, finally taking a proper look at his new quarters.

"Yeah. We've been- been good. No, ah, problems from people like us. So we have privileges." Peter pronounces it with a 'puh', causing it to stumble out of his mouth. "That's what my worker said."

That explains everything perfectly. The room is much more decent than his old one. There's a desk with a computer at the far right of the room. Two beds sit on opposite sides, and even if they're only twin sized they look comfortable. Beside the white cabinet that Peter had pointed out there's a small red couch, and right beside that is a white door that Will assumes leads to the bathroom.

Peter moves over to the couch, sitting down with the mouse cradled in his lap. It scampers out from his reach, investigating the cushions. "What can you do?" He asks, looking at Will with genuine curiosity.

"I'm an empath." Will's tempted to leave out the other part of his ability, but that wouldn't exactly be fair to his new roommate. "And when people touch me, they die."

It's a blunt explanation. Peter looks shaken for only a moment before that curiosity comes right back. "Why?"

No one's ever asked *why.* They've usually just taken that knowledge and made the smart decision to keep a good distance away from Will. It only takes him a few seconds to bounce back from this surprise, though. "I'm not really sure. I think it's been chalked up to a burst of lethal psychic energy when physical contact's made."

"Oh," Peter says. "I'm- I got something similar. I mean, to the- the empathy. Zoopathy. That's, uh, what my worker said. Only with animals." He reaches out to the rat, extending a finger for it to examine. "I can- can talk to them, if I want. Other stuff too."

Will looks between Peter and the mouse. “How’d it happen?”

“Kicked by a horse.” He points to the scar. “Right here. Wasn’t a mean horse, just scared. Got knocked in and then I just….I could. You?”

“My dad almost beat me.”

Peter takes the explanation with only a soft hum of understanding and without a single question. Will decides then he’s going to like Peter as a roommate.

“Lots of people with bad stories here. Just- just, uh, just means you ought to stick together. That’s what I think.” Peter murmured to himself, head swaying as he pet Kevin his trembling fingers.

Before Will can think better of it, he crosses the room to the couch. Peter cups a hand protectively over the mouse’s back, watching Will warily even as his touch retreats. He allows Will enough room to caress Kevin’s fragile little body. He imagines soft fur and a fluttering little heartbeat, the tickle of whiskers against skin as Kevin bumps his twitching nose into the glove.

When he looks up, Peter is absolutely beaming.

They get along rather well after that.

Peter is quiet and keeps to himself when Will isn’t in the mood to talk and when Will is, he’s eager to have any kind of conversation. They watch movies off of the computer together, eat together, working as units around one another (Peter suggests at one point to even try and push their beds together, but Will politely declines).

It’s easy. It’s *good.* Will has no complaints for an entire week, happy to rest and rise in Peter’s company. So, obviously, just when he wishes for things to stay just as they are, they change.

Peter just began to give Kevin the leftovers of their finished breakfast trays when there’s a slight whine from above, a burst of static and a voice (all of which startle the two, the mouse scurrying quickly back towards the cabinet).

“Recreational Time in three minutes.” A robotic voice comes through the speakers on the wall. There’s another burst of static. Silence.

Peter’s instantly up on his feet. “Wuh- Will?”

Will says nothing, rising off the bed. He’s been wondering when they would make some use of the common room. By now, they’ve gathered every meta-human that’s supposed to be here, made every preparation for their stay. He just really hadn’t thought they’d introduce this new time in such an abrupt way.

“It’s alright, Peter. Tell Kevin to stay inside.” Whoever is watching over them has to know about the mouse by now, but that doesn’t mean it should go scampering around.

The three minutes pass. The lock on the door clicks before it slides open, but no ones comes through to escort them. Will takes a few tentative steps towards it before peeking outside, surprised to find there's no guards but plenty of other cautious gazes coming out from the other rooms.

The more paranoid part of Will's mind says it's a test. Agents are surveying their actions, trying to see how they behave. If he steps out fully, a guard or two will appear right out of some secret hole in the wall and detain, beat or kill him.

The more majority of his mind that lacks any sense of survival says *fuck it,* and he steps into the hall.

Surprisingly, there's no blaring lights or sudden alarms. No guards jump out and no agent comes to scold him. Nothing happens at all.

It's enough to inspire others to come out, looking around carefully as if they fear the same thing he does. Peter joins him outside, huddling behind him, fingers latching and unlatching on the back of his jumpsuit. Everyone is watching each other; Will is watching the now very open door at the end of the hall. It takes only a few seconds for others to notice it too. One of those closest to it (a bald woman with six eyes) creeps towards it and reaches a hand through the entrance.

Another silent, collective sigh of relief is breathed as no consequence comes reigning down. It's only a few minutes later that they're filing into the common room, some choosing to carefully investigate their environment while others simply plopped down in the nearest seat to enjoy themselves.

Peter remains right at his back as they come through. It looks almost exactly like when he'd first entered, save for a few couches placed here and there. Will stands in the middle of it all waiting for the other shoe to drop and feels some swirling, anxious pit in his chest when it just *doesn't.*

Soft murmurs amongst pairs grow louder. People start to clump together to talk or pull out one of the board games, a few turning on the TV's and flipping through the channels available.

"Will?" Peter whispers, pulling on his jumpsuit. He's standing upright (or as upright as Peter gets). "Okay?"

He looks out at the others. They're easing into these luxuries like it's nothing, like they aren't just devices to get them to continue to behave. They're all so naïve.

Or, maybe they're adapting better than Will. He can't assume they're all stupid if they've survived this long in the program. Complying with the silent demands of those in control is the smartest move they could make in this circumstance (Will knows better than anyone; he's been doing it for more than twenty years).

He breathes in, holds it, and exhales. Time to adapt.

“Yeah,” he says, leading Peter towards a table. “Okay.”

Rec gives him time to learn about his fellow ‘neighbors’. As he’d suspected, none of them are particularly stable.

The first real introduction happens on the second day. They only have two hours of rec time in the morning, another two hours in the evening, so Will makes do with the time that he has with board games. Peter likes them even if Will has to guide his actions with each move, tell him where he’s putting his piece and what it means (and the only reason he even knows how to play any of them is because of Alana). They’d been playing scrabble when Katherine Primms joined them at the table.

She’d seemed pretty decent, at first. Soft-spoken and a little distracted, but decent. They greeted each other and played, Will at least trying at something like small talk. Asking about her abilities is nothing to really note; everyone seems to want to know who and what they’re being neighbored by, and for good reason.

“Hive-mind capabilities.” she’d said, placing letters across to spell out the word ‘cat’ (at which seeing, Peter had made a soft, happy hum). When Will had asked if she meant mind control, she’d shaken her head and looked at him like he was just teetering on the edge of stupid. “Not exactly. I’d gather people that were in pain. I'd ease it.” She’d said that, very much unlike mind control, there was no way to ‘switch it off’. Once they were part of her collective, they stayed that way.

She later explained with a gentle smile that she'd deliver them out from their suffering.

Will has some idea of what that means and finds all of the missing details a little unnerving.

Only a few days later when he meets Eldon Stammets, a man who has the ability to turn others into zombie-like, fungus-ridden *things* does he decide it’s better for the two of them to keep entirely to themselves.

Will isn’t necessarily surprised that the others are so strange. Anyone who activated their meta-human gene had to have gone through something terrible enough to get their abilities and for a time, they must have lived in a world where, in a small way, they were almost superior to the majority. Anyone who went through that would have a bit of a screwy head. Will’s no exception to that.

Peter is the only person he finds any companionship in anyways. He's easily understandable and gentle and, in an odd way, Will can’t help but feel like he wants to protect him. He doesn’t even know what he wants to protect him from until the third week.

The lights go out in their quarters at nine o’clock, leaving the room almost entirely black. Will is on his bed, his gloves set on his nightstand and his hands folded over his stomach. He stares up at the inky ceiling, smiling at the soft squeaks he hears from the other side of the room.

“Kuh- Katherine talked to me today,” Peter says. Will hums and keeps his disapproval to himself (he doesn’t like the woman, but he isn’t about to tell the other who he can and can’t talk to). “Told me about her tests. Not here but- but, but before.” He hears Peter swallow thickly. Anxiety crawls over to his side of the room, pooling in the mattress around Will. “They ever make you do, uh, bad things?”

Will doesn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

It’s quiet as Peter collects his thoughts. “They gave me birds. I only wanted to talk- to talk to them. Told me to, uh, do more.” Will sits up slowly on his bed, resting his head against the wall as he hears Peter’s voice work through the emotions that threaten to close up his throat. “I said- I told them no, not ever. I only talk to them. I only do that. No. Nothing else.”

He can fill in the blanks himself. “They made you control your birds.”

His chest aches at the sudden burst of grief from the other side of the room. “I didn’t want to. I didn’t. Never. But I went- went back to my room and-“ Will can practically see him shaking his head vigorously, his hands gripping onto the front of his jumpsuit. “All of ‘em were gone. My pets- they, they gave me them and then they just. Poof. Gone. Empty.”

“I didn’t *want* to,” Peter whispers after a lapse of silence.

“What did they make you do?”

A pained noise comes from across the room, accompanied by a series of pitiful squeaks. “Hurt each other. Hurt other people.”

“I’m sorry, Peter.” Will’s voice is soft, but his nails are biting crescent shapes into his palm.

The shared sadness he feels is expected (Peter is giving it out in heavy waves- it’s impossible to avoid reacting to it, especially when Peter is his friend). The anger, however, is not.

He has been in Peter’s shoes- he’s had to hurt people by the orders of men who really couldn’t give a damn about his wellbeing. He’s lived his life with a dull sense of purpose, resigned himself as an object to be used and disposed of when the time is right. He doesn’t feel angry about what’s been done to him. Feeling anything about the situation is useless when he can do nothing to change it.

But he feels angry for Peter. For what they’ve done, for what they’re doing, for what they’ll inevitably to do them all in the future.

He doesn’t sleep. The shape that his anger has taken looms above him through the night, its antlers resting just inches away from his skull.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> "And…" He trails off, apparently caught up in his own memories. His knuckles are white, but he doesn't look scared.
>
> Will's brow inches up just slightly. "And?"
>
> Matthew looks back to him. When he speaks, his voice is a reverent whisper. "He ate them."

Chapter Notes

> Updates are coming in just as slowly as I'm taking this story, I swear

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As much as he wishes the outside world had simply come to a stop since he moved into the bunker, (a place that has been lovingly dubbed by its residents as 'The Burrow') he knows that it's still turning and turning and makes a point to be involved. Or at least a spectator to it.

He follows the Lounds case as much as possible. The days that he manages to get into the rec room fast enough to gain control over one of the TV's, he instantly fishes for any news station and waits for reports on the ongoing investigation. The updates are slow and disjointed, and he's forced to put all the pieces together himself. He knows Freddie's been released from the custody of the FBI and is currently lazing glamorously in all the public attention (and subsequent support). She's a woman of the people. The public's idea of the government is becoming less than positive as the days go on.

Jack is absolutely nowhere to be seen, much to the upset of every reporter practically praying for another slip-up from the M.C.P or at least to get a word from the man that kickstarted the entire Lounds fiasco in the first place. Despite the implications and possible disaster that would come of him showing his face again, Will wishes he would make at least one appearance, if only to see that he's doing well.

He watches the screen as cameras pan over a crowd of activists waving signs and marching through the streets of Chicago, and then Philadelphia, then New York. Apparently, the idea of an organized, nation-wide protest circulated enough to gain traction and become a reality.

“It’s a little strange to be on the other side of the screen,” Katherine turns to look at him. “Don’t you think?”

He’s been forced to tolerate her presence since Peter decided she was something like a friend. She doesn’t come around too often, but often enough that Will’s nerves get a tiny bit frayed (her steady stream of calmness doesn’t make too much sense to him and the way her mind pricks and pokes at his every so often makes him a little more than wary). “I try not to think about it.”

She hums and settles back on the couch. Peter’s not too far from them, sitting on a chair he pulled up from a table. He’s puzzling his way through a Rubix cube. It’s a slow process, considering he has to move pieces then look where they landed. Yesterday he managed to get a full side done.

“What do you think of her?” Katherine asks.

“Who?”

“The journalist. Freddie Lounds.”

Will can’t help but laugh. “I think you’re giving her too much credit by calling her a journalist.”

“She’s trying to tell the story of meta-humans for her news outlet. That’s at least by definition a journalist.”

“She’s just a writer who tries to veer every piece to her paranoid cluster of an audience. She’s famous by chance right now, not because of in-depth research and need for truth.” Will stares hard as the picture of her that passes the screen. “She was just at the wrong place at the right time, and now she’s doing everything she can to milk it.”

Katherine looks surprised (she has the right to be; it’s probably the first time he’s had even a hint of emotion around her). “It sounds like you’re pretty invested in this.”

“Aren’t you? If this keeps up, it could affect us.” Will gestures to the meta-humans gathered in the room. “It’s already affecting us.”

Katherine shrugs. “Whatever happens from here is just going to happen. If it goes bad, I’d rather not have to follow the lead-up to it. If it doesn’t, then I don’t have to think about how I wasted time worrying over it.”

“That’s a very blasé approach to it.”

“What other approach is there?” Katherine asks, seemingly genuinely curious. He’s instantly faced with his own ideas of their situation, the way that he’s gone into each and every part of his life in the M.C.P.

There’s that part of Katherine that pokes at him again. It’s a subtle thing, a scratch at the mental walls that Will has put up. He’s quick to reinforce them, patching up any kind of relaxed crack that might have been there.

As that presence leaves, Katherine visibly leans away. She smiles gently. “Sorry.”

"Don't."

“It’s a reflex.” There’s still that smile. “It’s instinct to want to help.”

Will barely holds back his own wave of disgust. “That’s not *help*.”

He pushes his walls out, pressing heavily against Katherine. She doesn’t lean again, but there’s a slight twitch of her hands. A hot sting of pain shoots behind his eyes.

(he *really* doesn’t care)

“I apologized.” She says. He doesn’t bother with her anymore, looking back to the screen. He tunes into the anchor talking about the rise of meta-humans found in the European population.

Katherine moves on from him quickly, getting up so she can stand next to Peter and help him with the Rubix cube. There’s that same prickling protectiveness that Will feels for his friend, but he doesn’t do anything. Katherine wouldn’t do anything to Peter. So far, she seems content to try and mother him (Peter allows this here behavior out of ‘politeness’, only complaining to Will later on when it gets a bit much).

He doesn’t completely understand why Peter’s decided she’d be welcome into their tiny circle. Maybe it’s because she’s patient with him, or that she’s really the only other person in here to interact with anyone in a way that isn’t entirely hostile.

It’s understandable why they are. No one knows anything about anyone. He isn’t even sure if the people rooming together have decided to bond as he and Peter had. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter. It’s better for him anyway; it means no one will ask any questions about him or what he'd been up to before all this.

Will hasn’t told Peter everything— not yet. His roommate is more than eager to share his stories, both before his mutation kicked in (literally) and after, when he became the government’s guinea pig. Will had only divulged light things, like the tests they did before he started his real work.

To his own surprise, he talks about Alana pretty often. In a way, he misses her. Not enough to call her up for a visit, of course, but it’s still there.

When he turns his attention back to the TV, the anchor is parroting back the usual kind of caution. *If you encounter any unusual behavior, if you suspect anyone, tell your local authorities.* Will can only imagine the meta-humans who haven’t been detained looking at the news. Most were likely packing up all their things and trying to find some way to get to the safety of the border.

Because of you.

He pushes that thought underneath the mental rug before it can start to fester.

It's useless to place blame at this point, but he can't help it. Everything starts and ends with him, right with Garrett Jacob Hobbs. If he wants, he can go further back than that. The dominos start right at the moment he killed his father. In essence, he created this; Krendler had always praised him for how he was the very foundation of the M.C.P's work.

His gut twists with guilt. Will focuses in on his shoes, stark and lace-less, and tries to clear his head.

(it's hard not to think about how maybe it would have been better if his deadbeat father had just killed him that night, thrown his frail body into a swamp to sink to the bottom or end in the belly of a gator)

"I could help," Katherine says from the corner, breaking him out of his own head.

Peter's annoyance is prickly and oddly satisfying from Will's end. "I- I got it. 'm fine."

"Really," Will peers over to see her hovering over Peter's shoulder. "It'll be a little easier this way."

He shakes off the morbid thoughts entirely as he prepared to intervene—

"I think he's doing just fine."

The voice comes from just behind them, The owner is sitting at a round table by himself. He's young and fair, with a thin-lipped look and short brown hair. There are no outward signs of his powers anywhere. If he hadn't been in the same bland uniform, one might've assumed he was just….well, normal.

"Seems like he's gotten the hang of it. Also seems like he doesn't need anyone playing mommy."

There's a spike of annoyance from the side, but nothing more. He hears Katherine let out a soft huff. In a way, it's nice to know that she was other emotions besides just a numbing calm. Will just wishes *he'd* been the one to cause that ripple, is all.

Peter offers the stranger a twitching grin. He responds in kind, though his eyes don't linger on Peter for too long, snapping back onto Will.

"Thanks," he says.

The stranger's grin grows more genuine. "No problem." He turns in his seat, offering a wink over his shoulder just before his back his facing Will entirely. It catches him off-guard instantly. There's the unintentional pulse of feeling then, gravitating towards the one person who can both decipher it and who it was seemingly intended for.

It falls sweetly on his tongue, at first. It tastes like kinship, like familiarity, a secret shared. It's all quick to fall away to something darker; when he swallows, it sits like a stone in his stomach, his organs squirming around the weight of it.

Despite everything that screams for him to investigate, he doesn't. Will turns back to the TV, tuning in just as the anchor starts to talk about what some meta-human "specialists" believe might be the cause of the sudden flux in gene mutation, and tries to forget about the interaction entirely.

That becomes almost impossible, seeing as the stranger decides to pop up everywhere.

Apparently, he'd taken Will's thanks as some kind of invitation for friendship; the next time they're in the rec room, he sits nearly the same distance as before, though finds it in him to try and strike up a conversation. Will doesn't really participate in it. When Peter decides to chime in, the stranger (now known as Matthew) pays him just enough attention so that he doesn't come off as rude. Will is sure that if he didn't make it clear Peter was his friend, Matthew would ignore him completely.

It's around the second week of this when Matthew tries to make some conversation that isn't just him lightly prying or trying (and failing) to making some small talk. Will's glued to the TV as usual. The Lounds case has made some progress. She's no longer in custody, but she's not completely free from Jack's grip; there are still government agents following on her heels wherever she goes, both as some kind of protection and as a reminder to keep everything hush-hush. The reminders working pretty well, considering there haven't been any new posts on Tattle-Crime, but he's sure she'll find a way around her guards. She always finds *something.*

The news stories circulating that day don't focus too heavily on that, though. With Freddie's silence, it makes sense that they'd want to move onto something a little more exciting.

Matthew has turned his chair away from the table to face the TV, his elbows resting on the back of the couch a little way away from Will's head. "Any reason you're always watching this and not something interesting?"

"This *is* interesting." Will says, eyes flickering over the captions at the bottom. *EU Tracking Potential Meta-Human Rings.* "Even if we're not part of the world it doesn't mean we shouldn't know what's going on." He was sure that when the M.C.P decided there was too much news on meta-humans or their own whereabouts, they'd cut the line to any news channel. It was a luxury he couldn't afford to ignore.

Matthew hums in agreement, his opinion swayed easily. The screen flicks to clips of the meta-humans they've captured. Thick metal collars are wrapped around their necks, hands bound in equally threatening looking cuffs. They're marching in groups down some kind of dirt road. It's hard to focus on anything the reporter's saying, most of it drowned out by the wind in the background and the heavy sounds of machinery. "I think that's what they did to the rest of us," Matthew says. "The ones who didn't make the cut."

Will isn't really sure if he likes that phrasing. It makes it sound like this place was something to work for. Honestly, those who didn't make it here deserved more than petty privileges like a TV or a couch. They were the ones who were quite literally fighting for their own freedom, after all.

But as they get a close-up of the marching group and he sees their tired faces, exhaustion hanging off their faces and shoulders and practically seeping through the screen, it becomes difficult to speak.

The screen changes before his emotions can get away from him, back to the anchor. Beside him, Matthew lets out a heavy sigh, though Will doesn't actually feel any remorse. The only thing trickling through is pity. "Don't worry about them," He says, almost in a gentle way. "He'll get to them out soon."

Will peers over his shoulder to look at the other. "Who?"

Matthew leans into Will, smiling a little too brightly. "The Ripper."

Despite how quiet he is, a few eyes still manage to stray their way. The glances don't linger long enough for Will to feel their burn, but he still knows they were there; there's no one any of them wouldn't chance a look at the mention of *that* name. That confirms to him that the rest of them know the Ripper as well as he does. Will's taken to the name and tucked it away with the same measure as one does to an urban legend, except he knows he's very much real. Nothing but the Ripper could leave behind the same kind of carnage, mass graves and mutilated bodies.

Still, Will doesn't react in fear or curiosity or awe. He's rather deadpan as he turns to Matthew. "Really?" Even his tone is flat.

Matthew seems agitated Will even questions him. "Yes, *really."* He hops over the back of the couch in one fluid motion, sitting close enough to Will that he stuffs his hands deep into his pockets, despite the fact he's already wearing his gloves. He doesn't look at Matthew directly, but he can see from the corners of his gaze there's excitement glinting in his eyes. "I've seen him. Not up close, but I have." He nods, keeping relatively quiet. "Before I got taken, before all of this, I was in this underground station. It was absolute shit- there were barely any supplies left, people were starving. It was pathetic. I'm surprised that we didn't get caught sooner, but when we did-" He sucks in a breath, looking to the wall with distant awe. "He was *there."*

"So, he watched you get taken?" Will asks, unsure of what he's supposed to be getting out of this.

"No, he *stopped* them." Matthew frowns. "Most of them anyways. I was already detained when he showed, but I saw it all happen from inside the truck, right through the slats. He saved the ones they hadn't gotten yet. He protected them. And the agents…he plowed through their defenses like it was nothing- he tore them apart like fucking paper. And…" He trails off, apparently caught up in his own memories. His knuckles are white, but Will feels nothing like fear coming off of him.

"And?"

Matthew looks back to him. When he speaks, his voice is a reverent whisper. "He ate them."

He doesn't sleep very well after that. It's not because he's scared of what he's learned. His curiosity is what makes it so hard to have anything but restless night and vivid nightmares.

The first episode he has is small and the nightmare itself is rather abstract. There's no real gore, just the imitation of it. There are deep splashes of red. Will only wakes up when the distant droning in his ears turned to full-fledged screams.

He wakes up the same every night for two weeks. Sweat is soaking into his shirt, practically pooled around him because his sheets aren't able to absorb it all. He'll pant and shake and curl up with his head pressed against the cool wall. Peter only wakes up when Will's nerves start to haunt the room, stalking around and jumping from place to place, unsure of where they can be held because the walls of Will's brain have toppled over.

When it's especially bad and Will's a damp, shaking mess in his bed, Peter will crawl over from the other side of the room and sit at his bedside. He'll put on Will's gloves and pet his hair, humming all the while (and yes, it makes Will feel like one of Peter's animals sometimes, but the leather against his forehead is calming and stops most of the shaking).

It's one of those nights. Will's sheets are absolutely soaked through and his teeth won't stop chattering. His breath feels caught in his chest, unable to make it out of his lungs, but whimpering sounds keep coming out of his mouth so he knows he's not suffocating and that it only feels like it.

Peter's on the floor beside him rather than on the mattress this time. He's humming, but this time it just sounds like a tune he's making up on the spot, the melody going up and down, hitching strangely here and there. Will knows it's because his nerves are bouncing around, striking Peter enough times for his own anxiety to heighten. It doesn't help that it keeps lashing, twitching and trying so desperately to spread, to find something to latch onto and soak into.

When most of the worst is over, Will is left shivering on the bed. There's a wet patch on his chest that sticks so much he can see the contours of his own collarbone.

"Bad tonight?" Peter asks gently.

Will nods wordlessly at the ceiling.

"What of?"

It's not the first time Peter's asked. It's also not the first time Will's considered answering. He wants to describe it somehow, if only so that he won't be all but drowning in Peter's worry and confusion. He doesn't, because all of *that* isn't a burden he wants the other man to bear. Still, it hurts hear Peter sigh and watch him slump against the side of the bed. Will turns over onto his side, pushing the pillow out of the way so he's laying completely flat. They both just stay like that till the lights flick on about an hour or so later, and Will only moves because the stench of his sweat gets too much to stand.

The shower doesn't help much. The sound of water dripping off ringlets of his hair, falling from his eyelashes, sounds a little too much like blood dribbling for his own comfort.

(his nightmares go something like this:

Red and black and blue bleeds from the walls; the colors are thick and warm and spill from between his fingers. He doesn't know when he actually reached out to touch them. There'll be no noise besides his echoed breathing. His chest will feel like its rising and falling at an even pace, but the sound of it is wet, panting, coming out of his throat in heavy gurgles.

It will turn after a few moments. The soft, thumping in the background will become a drum. When he looks around, he'll realize that room is a writhing, fluid mess. It's all alive, tortured but alive, pumping lifeblood through it and desperately trying to get Will out. *Still, he won't know why till he licks his chapped lips and tastes salt and copper, fingers searching through his mouth to pick out fleshy, pink chunks.*

Any sense of calm will leave him and he'll scramble around the living cavern for any kind of escape. The organ shrieks when he goes for the walls, blood spewing out from the scratches he leaves. Sometimes, if his mind is so far gone, he'll suck on his fingers and gasp when as the coppery tang gets stuck in the back of his throat. He'll cry out with the thing's shared pain, smack his hands against his head, claw at his own face and watch their blood mingle together on the ground.

Whenever he manages to look up, he'll see the same horned figure looming above him. It doesn't speak or move, breathe or bleed. It simply watches.

"Why?" Will asks over and over. "Why?"

He won't see the figure move- he'll only feel it. Spindly fingers brushing through his blood-soaked hair, the tips reaching the back of his head. It's gentle until it's not- they'll suddenly snap shut on his locks, tug his whole body upright. He'll scrabble at the thing's arms, hiss and spit and struggle like a wild animal. It doesn't relent. Its soulless eyes will bore into him when that long neck cranes its head forwards, mouth gaping open to reveal teeth. When it finally bites down into the meat of his shoulder, Will can do nothing but scream.

Only when the pain is truly unbearable is he able to look around and see his flesh-ridden cage has begun to bloom with bloody, poisonous flowers)

Honestly, he'd expected Alana to come sooner.

"Why didn't you call me?" is the first thing she asks when she comes through the door. They've put him in a private room with a table and a couch. It's a little suffocating, especially

with the colorful little pictures hung up on every wall.

“I didn’t think we were allowed to use any phones here.” He says calmly in response. He really shouldn’t be toying with her; she looks a little wild-eyed as it is, and he knows it’s all out of concern for him, but it’s been harder for him not to be a jackass lately.

Alana gives him a steely look. “You know what I meant.” She doesn’t settle on the couch next to him, instead just pulling up one of the chairs from the side so that she can sit right in front of him. She crosses one leg over the other, hands clasped tight into her lap and stares at him head on. “They showed me the security footage from your room.”

He doesn’t take the prompt immediately, waiting for her to try something else, but she just stares. Will sighs, looking just a little ways beyond her left ear. “They’re just nightmares. It’s normal.”

“You’ve never gotten them before. Not like this.” Her features soften suddenly, and she leans forward in her seat. “If something’s going on, if someone’s doing anything…” The sentence trails off, leaving room for him to finish the thought hanging off of it.

Will actually snorts. “I’m not being *abused* here, Alana.”

“It’s a possibility. Don’t laugh it off like it’s not.”

“It’s pretty impossible considering nobody can even touch me.”

With that, she’s back to the same hard stare. “Fine. It’s not. So tell me what’s actually going on.” When he gives her about two minutes of silence, she shrugs and settles back into her seat. “If you don’t talk right now, fine. Then we can just sit here until you’re ready.”

And so they do just that for fifteen minutes.

It’s the longest fifteen of his life.

“It’s…” Will starts finally. Any boredom on Alana’s face is wiped away in an instant, but it still takes him some time to think of what he should say. He doesn’t really want to talk about his dreams, but he knows he has to. That doesn’t mean he has to do that so directly, though. “….what do you know about the Ripper?”

Alana looks visibly taken aback. She’s quick to collect herself though, rearranging the way her skirt folds around her knees in fidgety kind of way. “He’s a terrorist.”

“I know that already. What do *you* know about him?”

Alana’s eyes search of his face for something, and when she doesn’t find it, she sighs. “I’d really rather not talk about that, Will.”

Will reaches across the way, placing a gloved hand over hers. There’s a burst of emotion in the room, but he can’t quite pinpoint what it is. He doesn’t try. “Please.”

He's quick to bring his hand back before she can possibly turn her own over to hold it, but she doesn't take that as some kind of offense. There's that hint of vulnerability edging around the room as she looks down. "We got wind of him around 2004. It wasn't anything substantial- just some hazy rumors and a few bodies. It was odd, but not our kind of odd." She says. "It wasn't until the mass graves were found that any real investigation started. They were…" Alana's face twitches. "I wasn't around when they were coming up everywhere, but I've seen a few. Not in person, but the bodies…"

"I know. Jack showed me once."

There's obviously something about that that Alana wants to talk about, going by the heavy frown she gives him, but she simply moves on. "It was more than enough to grab the M.C.P's attention. The bodies were collected and examined. He got his own little nickname from one of the guys working on it. The way each body was mutilated, ripped apart like some kind of animal attack- it wasn't the most creative name, but it fit just fine. There haven't been any incidents like those graves since, but we've gotten similar, if smaller, events. The bodies weren't torn in the same way, though. It was more planned."

"More planned than several mass graves?"

"Unfortunately, yes. All of the same pieces were gone, but it had less carelessness. They were all almost…posed. It was all meticulous work. Gorey, horrific work, but still meticulous." Alana says. "All that we know is he has super-human strength, some flight abilities-"

"And a taste for human flesh." Will finishes.

It's definitely not what she was going for, going by the face she makes, but Alana doesn't correct him. "Yes. And that. We're not sure whether *that* has any purpose or meaning for his powers, or if it's just for pleasure. Considering how little we actually know about him, it could go either way." There's a pause. She's searching his face again. "Why are you asking about all this now? What does he have to do with any of your nightmares?"

"I don't really know." He says. "In the rec room, one of the people in there just started talking about him. He talked about how he thinks the Ripper is some savior to meta-humans. Not in a fanatical kind of way, it just seemed like heavy hero-worship." Will watches the way her fingers flex in her lap. "It didn't sound all that crazy."

"So, someone said that the Ripper, of all people, is coming to swoop in and save the day and then you get nightmares?" Alana asks in her therapist, *help-me-connect-the-dots-here* voice.

Will raises his hands. "I'm not the one who does the psychoanalyzing here. I just read their emotions."

He manages to get a smile out of Alana. It feels like some kind of victory, no matter how small that smile is. "Too bad you're terrible at reading your own." She uncrosses her legs, looking over to the one-way mirror to their right with just the slightest nod before turning back to Will. "I'm getting you on some sleeping medication. If it doesn't do anything for you, you *have* to call me."

“I swear.” Will says. They chat for a bit, but it’s still tense when she’s called out of the room. Despite everything, the weight on his shoulders feels a little lighter when he goes back to his room.

The pills don’t really help. Unsurprisingly, Will doesn’t call for Alana. He can’t really sleep, but the nightmares dissipate into fuzzy memories. It feels stupid to make a fuss about a few restless hours.

(he only has one nightmare, and it goes like this:

He doesn’t need to start scratching at the walls for the organs to start shrieking. They will move and quake and expand, slowly, but surely, leaving him in a gaping, fleshy void. Will does what he knows, kicking and fighting against the being with all that he has until that same gangly figure comes around, and when he does-

They’re in his room.

It will be empty, save for a sweat-soaked bed. The same figure will be there, but it’s no longer the same gangly beast as before. Its form becomes a squirming amalgamation of shadows and flesh, trying to imitate something human and failing miserably. When Will steps forwards, it will step back. They will dance like this for what feels like hours before the creature finally hits the back wall.

Those same dead eyes will stare back. He won’t move, even when it reaches out for him and touches his neck, his jaw, fingertips brushing over his face.

Oh, *it will say, fingers digging into temples.* That’s interesting)

Chapter End Notes

I feel so bad every time I look at the comments and people like "can't wait for Hannibal to show up" because literally, only had flashes of him here and there. BUT I'm happy to let you all know....we're getting there. I hope this chapter at least helped to quench most of your Hanni-thirst

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Events are set in Motion.

Chapter Notes

Remember how I said updates after spring break? Oof.

Thankfully, summer's here! Which means plenty of time for writing. Hopefully. I'm probably jinxing myself, honestly.

Anyways, another small taste of our man, and a relatively quiet instance before Will's life spontaneously combusts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seas no longer part them. The day is no longer bright. Still, a teapot whistles.

It doesn't stay shrieking for long, plucked up from a dirty stove, the water poured into a fine china teacup. Bedelia Du Maurier takes her tea with a spot of honey and a bit of milk— only a bit, though, so the flavor can be balanced. Her pallet has been refined over the years, so it's understandable that she's a bit displeased to drop in a processed sugar cube into her cup.

She takes a seat on a fold-out chair, one leg gracefully crossing over the other. "Are you sure about this?" She asks, all while watching the sugar dissolve slowly, particle by particle.

Beyond her calm little bubble, a hive of motion continues on. Boxes are moved, plans are carted left and right; a cacophony of noise can be heard even from inside their room. It's not too surprising, seeing as all the doors are rickety and the walls are thin. They aren't exposed beyond this; underground, all of the noise is simply absorbed and echoed throughout a tunneling maze of meta-humans.

Her pallet finds this revolting as well. It reminds her of rats, holed away and scuttling around, bumping into each other mindlessly.

From afar, a voice asks: "What do you mean?" He remains unbothered by the commotion. He fixes his gloves, his boots, making sure everything is in place.

Bedelia stirs her tea. "This course of action seems particularly…" She lifts her gaze to the room. Her spoon taps the rim of her cup. "Reckless."

“This moment has been planned for some time.”

“Planned, yes.” Bedelia takes a sip. The sweetness is overpowering and artificial. “But we didn’t agree on execution this early.”

The man moves to the other side of the room, offering a soft hum. From a table, he plucks up a helmet of sorts, turning it over in his hands. “Any longer and our window of opportunity would close. You’ve planted the seed. Best to take what we can of the harvest before it’s spoiled.”

“Hannibal.”

He turns to her and smiles, quietly amused with himself. “Am I not allowed a moment of impulsivity?”

Bedelia watches as he places the helmet over his head. It’s sleek and black, covering his face completely, only leaving an expressionless, curved shell behind. “You’re allowed whatever you like,” she says. “I don’t know anyone that would be able to deny you of your obsession. I’m just making an observation.”

On the top, barely jutting out from the skull, are antlers.

It’s terribly dramatic.

She expects nothing less from him.

Chapter End Notes

Note: I'm diverting a little away from Reapersun's original design of Hannibal's costume. His anonymity is key to everything he does as a silent agent of the universe, so a traditional mask just didn't feel right

The closest thing to what I'm imagining is a Batman-inspired bike helmet: https://www.freshnessmag.com/2013/08/20/dark-as-night-batman-inspired-motorcycle-helmet/

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The black mass that breathes against the back of his neck at night suddenly stands in the middle of the room. Its head sways, burdened by its antlers, and stares at Will.

You know what's happening, it seems to say.

Will stares at its beetle-like eyes glinting in the dark, and turns away.

Chapter Notes

We're almost at 6,000 hits! And holy fuck, more than 400 kudos!! Thank you so much to everyone who bookmarks, kudos, comments, or even decides to read Oleander! I know I'm literal trash at keeping a schedule and getting these out, but I genuinely do love writing it and knowing what you think, like or even dislike about it!

On a more complainy note: Debating on whether to break this chapter into two parts gave me a headache for a solid hour. This is my longest one yet and honestly the first actual exciting one in my opinion.

That said: please enjoy

"Have you ever seen snow?" Peter's sitting on the couch in their room. His fingers are rubbed at the little space between Kevin's ears gently.

"No," Will's voice is distant, not because he's necessarily disinterested in the conversation, but because he's working on setting up the string lights around the perimeter of the room. He hadn't really wanted them up, they're flashy and annoying and a less-than-gentle reminder of a season he'll never be able to fully appreciate, but Peter had wanted them, so now he's standing on a chair and struggling to get the lines to stay on the sticky hooks the wardens had provided with the decorations. "Have you?"

Peter shakes his head. "No. Not, uh, for real. On the TV I did, with all the- the deer prancing." A warm wave of happiness follows whatever thought Peter's just had, causing some of the tension to fall from Will's shoulders. "They're beautiful."

He hums in agreement. "They are."

Winter's rolled into the Burrow easily enough. Will believes they've hit at least mid-December at this point, though he can't be too sure. All he knows is that the staff is trying to be especially nice. It makes sense- most of the people here have celebrated some kind of holiday around this time. Depending on how long they've been with the M.C.P, more than a few will be aching for the same kind of spirit. It's a kind but cruel thing to do, and not for the first time Will's almost glad that no one really bothered to try and pretty up his situation as a kid.

The same can't be said for Peter. Whatever childhood he'd had hadn't been too cushy, but it'd still been an actual childhood. He'd had proper birthday's and holidays and family celebrations, even if they were small. Peter was his friend, and Will didn't quite feel up to spreading his cynical views all over the few things that appeared special to him.

He hops off the chair once he's finished, looking over his work. The lights are sagging in some places and not all of the hooks are very even, but Peter still beams when he plugs them in and they give off a multi-colored twinkle. Kevin scampers off to the far corner of the room when Peter stands to admire it all. Will's chest is light and it takes him a moment to realize that that warmth is no longer just coming from Peter.

Since his talk with Alana, things have actually been good. They have calls every now and again, ones where Will is led away to a separate room with a neat burner phone to use. Not every conversation is about his well-being; this time around, he actually *likes* to listen to Alana talk about her life. She does that often, actually; she'll sing her praises to Margot and curse her brother-in-law, talk about the house and what they're doing to the bathroom. In their last call, Alana told him about how they were thinking of adopting, to which Will responded with some genuine excitement on her behalf.

None of this makes Will particularly hopeful for the future, but he's been learning to enjoy the moments of peace that he's gotten. He refuses to admit that this new attitude just *might* come from Katherine's own sage advice. He still has some pride left, and it's all going into being stubborn.

"They'll probably have the rec room decorated as well," Will says. "It'll probably just ambiguously festive, though. They wouldn't want to subscribe to just one holiday." Not like anyone could make any real complaints about one festivity being favored over another, but still. Will was pretty sure they'd at least try to be careful with it.

Peter shrugs. "Better than- than nothing."

They look at the lights for a while before going about their separate business, right up until there's the ringing that calls for rec time. The shuffle towards the room is just normal, now, though Will's efforts to be first in line have faded over the weeks. The news isn't running too much of Freddie, and the whole story is being blown over as the hype dies down. There are still protests, sure, but if they're not being actively televised there's nothing he can really do.

As he'd expected, the room is decorated. There are strung up lights and cozy, festive-themed blankets thrown over the couches, and when the TV's get turned on each one is already pre-set to some kind of holiday movie. There's a conflict of emotions swarming around the room, tension and ease battling it out in waves as the residents seem to take stock of the sudden

change in their environment. Will builds up his walls as best as he can, managing to mute out the undercurrent just enough so that it doesn't give him a headache.

Surprisingly, Katherine doesn't come to see them. He does spy her at the far corner of the room, though he doesn't stare long enough to actually see what she's doing. He sits at a table with Peter and works out how to play some Monopoly.

They're little ways into the game when someone decides to start prowling around the table. Will doesn't take immediate notice; mostly he tries to ignore everyone who comes around, just in case they decide him acknowledging them is an invitation to talk (he'd already learned his lesson with Matthew). Still, it's hard not to notice when the stranger takes the tiniest pauses to start looming over his shoulder. Peter glances between Will and their visitor every now and again, confusion written on his face and blanketing over the table, an undercurrent of dislike making its way over. From over his shoulder, Will feels the distinct heat of hate.

When he turns around, he tries to make sure his expression is neutral. "Can we help you?" He asks, making sure his tone is hard enough to let the other know that he *really* isn't in the mood.

The stranger has eyes that are a static grey. It feels like they're trying to burn holes into Will's head. "I know you."

Will turns fully, frowning. "What?"

"I said," the man leans down some, pointing an accusing finger at his nose. "I know," and that finger travels, prodding him hard in the chest. *"You."*

That hate is heating up, climbing to a boiling point. Will tries to gently guide the other's hand away with the back of his hand. "I really don't think you-"

"We're here because of you. *I'm* here because of *you.* I noticed you- I knew it was you from day one, and I gave you time to fess up. I waited for it. I'm done waiting now." His hand suddenly curls and takes a fistful of Will's jumpsuit, but he doesn't do much else. Most of his body is blocking the view from the guards, and he hasn't raised his voice yet to catch their attention. Will doesn't feel any need to call for help, even with Peter starting to shake like a leaf from across the table. When Peter actually tries to speak, it comes out as a string of jumbled words, his tongue tripping and stumbling over itself. The man looks at him sharply, and he says from between his teeth, *"Shut it."*

His eyes turn into thin slits, turning into a glare. "I'm fine, Peter," Will says evenly, though doesn't actually look at the other. He's staring head-on, at the center of the man's forehead. His walls are built up fully now, stacking higher and higher till he can really only feel his own core numbness. "What am I supposed to be confessing?" He asks, even if he already knows.

The man fumes and tugs lightly on the front of his jumpsuit. "That you're the one who Lounds got, that you're the one who started all this." He pauses and tugs again, harder this time, leaning down enough that one of the guards at the edge of the room takes the slightest notice. There's something behind those grey eyes that's coiling, ready to strike and just barely

holding back. “I know what you’ve done to people like us, Graham. I’m going to make sure everyone else knows too.”

He lets go and Will falls back into his seat. He’s gone just as quickly as he’s arrived, stalking off, leaving an invisible, angry trail behind him. Will watches him go before flattening out the wrinkles on his chest, turning back to Peter. His companion’s pretty obviously shaken, fingers nervously pressing against one another, trailing over his knuckles the same way he would pet Kevin’s head.

When Peter’s finally able to speak beyond stutters, he asks, “What’d he mean?”

For the first time, Will completely ignores Peter and just stares at the unfinished game in front of him.

Understandably, things don’t go too fantastically for him from there.

Will had known that something like this would happen, of course; for a time, his face, even if obscured by shitty camera-quality and sunglasses, had been plastered all over the news, Tattle-Crime, and similar conspiracy-ridden blogs. Not only that, but he couldn’t just assume that no other meta-human here had never heard of him. Katz had already made it clear he was well-known enough to become some strange, urban legend amongst the agents of the organization; it wouldn’t make sense for no one beyond them to remain in the dark about his existence.

Thankfully, there’s no riots or any serious threats to his life just yet. For the most part, it’s really the same. People continue to not bother him- even Katherine only just hovers around them, always keeping a careful eye on Will when she decides it’s safe enough to go and play mother-hen to Peter. The only difference now is the icy stares he gets. He’s not entirely sure what they’d been told, as he’s not even sure what his would-be attacker actually even knew, but it’s obviously not been good.

On a particularly bad day, he gets spit on. Will, for his part, takes it pretty well. Peter is very upset. Matthew is something else entirely.

“You can’t let them treat you like that.” Matthew snaps once he’s become pretty tired of Will’s solemn act. “You can’t let them just step on. It’s not right.”

Will shakes his head. He keeps his gaze focused on where Katherine’s is, watching as she shows Peter what she’s been knitting. “They’re just scared-“

“They should be.”

He pauses, then, considering the waves of eagerness and clawing admiration seeping through. It makes his stomach turn in an odd and entirely unpleasant way. It’s nearly the same way he felt when they first met. “I don’t want them to be afraid of me.”

"Why?" Matthew asks, sidling up next to him at the table. "Before this, you were judge and jury. With just a tap, you decided who lived and who died. You were essentially a god, and now," He looks out to the room with a sneer. "Now you're being belittled by the same kinds of people you struck down. Do you know what God would do to people like that?"

Will actually turns to Matthew then. His hands are gripping the sides of his seat, something terrible behind his eyes. "I'm not a *god.* I didn't just *decide* to kill all those people- I was told to. I didn't have a choice." Every word comes out as a hiss, anger bubbling out of his mental restraints, crawling out to meet Matthew's excitement head-on.

If the other man feels anything, he doesn't show it (but still, Will can feel that slight tingle of pain somewhere in his head, though it's a faint thing). "But you still did it. You're still *able* to do it." Matthew watches him, searching for something he very obviously can't find. "That has to mean something to them." There's an unspoken notion of *that also has to mean something to you,* and Will's patience snaps.

His field pushes out more forcefully, sharper this time. Matthew visibly winces this time, his left eye twitching. From the corner of Will's own vision, he sees a dark, looming figure; it breathes hotly on the back of Matthew's neck, stomping into the ground in warning. Will sits up to his full height.

Matthew looks at him. There's no apology about to be delivered- Will can practically feel his resolve, stubbornness in his own truth. "Will-"

"I'd suggest throwing out whatever kind of wild impressions you've gotten of me from them," Will says.

Really, he should just cut Matthew out from his life entirely, or at least stop pretending he isn't just skating at the edges of whatever 'social life' that he has. They're not friends, not really, but he doesn't want to make any other enemies in this place.

Matthew seems to take this as some kind of mercy and relents, sighing and sitting back. He says something under his breath that Will doesn't quite catch, but he doesn't ask about it. They sit and stew in their shared but independent anger in absolute silence.

The only lie he tells Alana is that he still takes the sleeping pills. They're delivered with his dinner plate, sitting in a neat, white cup at the edge of his tray. Whenever he's finished with his meal, he takes it and excuses himself to the bathroom to go and get a glass of water. In reality, he only goes there because it's the one place that doesn't have security cameras; Will just watches them swirl down the sink, always waiting a minute or two before coming back out. When it's lights out, he turns his back to the camera at the side of the room, staring at the wall for the majority of the night.

Considering that Alana has yet to call him out on his bullshit, Will thinks he's pulling off a great act. It's not enough to convince Peter, of course. He never says anything about it, but there's always a sense of knowing that comes in the morning or when he strolls out from the bathroom.

There's that same sense late at night, though this time it pokes at his shoulder, curious and frightened all at once. His stomach churns uneasily, and he curls in a little tighter around himself when he hears the creak of a bed and a soft sigh.

Will listens to Peter's breathing, waits till he finally asks, "You ever kill anyone?"

"Yes."

The room doesn't turn cold, but the air definitely does shift. "How many?" Peter's voice is soft and surprisingly even, his stutter only just a shaking undertone.

It takes him a moment to answer. "I'm not sure." Will says. He's tried keeping tally before, but it's been so many years and so many wheeled out bodies- it's impossible to really remember them all, especially since all of their memories end up jumbled in his head.

He expects Peter to get angry, readies himself for the wave of disgust that's likely to come. That's just the appropriate reaction to learning that the person you've been living with has caused the deaths of so many people (innocent people, maybe even *good* people) for a little over twenty years. The fact that he can't remember might be seen as a sign that he doesn't care. Will doesn't try and make excuses for that, though, or correct any misconception. He really *should* have counted, if only to know exactly what kind of guilt he carries.

His thoughts are enough to occupy Will for the next few minutes, weighing on him so heavily that he doesn't even realize Peter hasn't said a word. He doesn't even really *feel* anything. It's enough to make him turn and squint into the dark, searching for a shadow somewhere. "Peter?"

There's a slight shuffling sound, a swirl of something that Will can't quite tack down. He sits up when Peter starts making his way over. The other man sits down on the bed beside him, wringing his hands and just looking at Will with the most sincere and sympathetic stare he's ever gotten. From what little light there is, Will swears he can see tears welling up at the corners of his eyes. "Peter?" He echoes, much more concerned this time around. "Are you-?"

He doesn't get to finish before Peter's suddenly wrapped around him. His arms are locked, his head pressed into his shoulder. Even if Will wasn't completely shocked into stillness, it would have been hard to struggle out of; Peter's surprisingly strong for his size. It almost hurts how much hard he's squeezing, but that's not really Will's focus. There's a wet feeling on his arm and a sudden, crippling feeling of sadness and familiarity that stuns him long enough for Peter to compose himself.

"I-It's not your fault," he says in a whimper. "I get it- I get it, they muh-made you. They made me too. I told you, they made me- me too."

And it's a terrible thing that Peter's doing. A terrible, terrible thing that makes Will's eyes water, makes him stare up at the ceiling and wonder what he's done to deserve this, only for the answer to be staring him right in the face. He shakes as he cries, which only makes Peter sob a little harder into him, babbling off reassurances that he doesn't need and certainly isn't due. Will closes his eyes and lets the sorrow sink into him, run right through to his lungs. It's

not for self-pity. It's agony- makes his joints feel like they're on fire, red-hot to the point it feels numb.

Will slumps into Peter and the other just holds him that much tighter, mumbling incoherently into the fabric of his jumpsuit. It takes some time before Will can even muster himself to return the embrace, holding Peter as best as he can, staring off to the darker corners of the room.

It may well be his imagination, but he feels something staring back. Its silent judgment makes his throat close up.

Still, it weighs heavily on his conscious that he doesn't have the heart to tell Peter where the blame really lies.

The guards do take notice of the sudden icy treatment Will's getting, but they don't really do anything about it. It's not like anyone has gotten explicitly violent towards him or actually given them a reason to intervene. Usually, they only watch from the corners of the room, take a little note if someone decides to prowl a little too close to where he and Peter have settled themselves, and then sit back when that whiff of a threat passes. Will is glad they don't do anything. Any further attention would probably make Alana came back around; she'd make a fuss about it all, probably offer to have him moved and actually make the guards try and give some kind of special attention to him during rec time (which, obviously, would only incite further hate for him).

The only person that Will actually pays attention to is the whistleblower, Andrew. Almost any time he searches around the room, he finds the man's stare on him. Sometimes it's passing, other times it's particularly focused. Either way, it's filled with a kind of anger that Will doesn't really care to give an exact name to.

Everyone's absolute hatred of him seems to take a moment to just simmer as the holidays roll into a full swing. More neutral decorations are put up, though when Hanukkah makes its way onto the calendar the Burrow does actually accommodate it. It's nothing extensive; a few plastic menorahs are the only thing that pops up, but that seems to ease a few of the other inmates.

Only a few, though. Will has to note the cloud of sadness that casts itself over the place. Even if he can't feel people, Peter even takes notice. They sit and watch as two women console their companion, who's hunched over in her chair, a hand covering her face. Her shoulders are shaking lightly, though her crying is surprisingly silent.

"They muh- miss their families," Peter says, voice soft. Sympathy is pouring out of him in waves. It's oddly comforting. "Makes sense."

"Do you miss your family?" Will asks. It's not like Peter's ever talked about anyone besides the animals he used to work with at the stables, but that doesn't mean that no one existed outside these walls.

Peter thinks for a moment, humming softly before shaking his head. “My momma and my dad are- they’ve been gone for a while. Didn’t have many friends. Well, human friends.” He smiles. “Lots of friendly huh- horses, though. One named Cream-Puff. White mare, liked having her- uh, her mane brushed. Loved strawberries. Gobbled ‘em right out of my hand.” His hand raises off of his lap just a little, palm turned up. Will feels a ghostly tickle on his own, a passing memory and little else. Peter turns to him. “You?”

He has to know that Will has no family, or at least no one he can remember distinctly. The rumors spread wide enough that he’s had to hear that Will pioneered this whole thing since he was a kid. Still….it feels a little nice, just to be asked.

“No,” he shakes his head. “No one really. There’s Alana, but it’s hard to miss her with the weekly calls.” Will thinks, trying to come up with something that relates, directly or indirectly. “…They let me have a visit with some dogs, once. It was only for a day, but it was nice.”

Peter lights up instantly. He starts with “what kind?” before bombarding him with a whole slew of questions about the dogs that he doesn’t know all the answers to but tries his best to come up with something.

They don’t often talk about their lives from before, but their little conversation seems to open the door for Peter telling him all about the stables. Will doesn’t mind it; it’s nice to hear Peter genuinely excited about something, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t at least a little interested in what happened on a farm.

They go through the rest of the month with more festivities. Their food trays are done up a little more, with turkey and chicken and thick slices of ham. Will always forks over his mashed potatoes to Peter—he likes them better, only ever picking at the meat.

(“I’ll eat it,” Peter says when Will asks about his aversion to one side of his tray. “I’m not- I don’t *not* eat it.” He tenderly stabs at a piece with his fork, frowning a little at it. “Just sometimes feel bad about it, y’know?”)

Time passes without incident. Will’s thankful for it, even if he watches out for the other shoe everywhere he goes.

Will and Peter have claimed their spots on the couch. One TV is playing an older holiday film, black and white and a little fuzzy. The other is (predictably) playing the news. Will notes the map that’s being displayed; there’s a red zone that’s spread from Italy to France, just the creeping edges of color along the east coast.

“Underground migration, seems like.” Matthew pipes up from the side. He’s seemed to have learned his lesson from their last ‘chat’; he keeps his distance just enough to satisfy Will, settled in a plastic chair to the right of the couch.

Will hums. “They’re cracking down now.”

“You say that like they weren’t strict about this stuff before.”

A red line snakes across the sea from Europe to the coast, where that little splotch of red is. Will's eyes trace it back and forth. "No, but sometimes they would just ignore the smaller units of meta-humans. Once they were over the border, they weren't the government's problem anymore."

"Guess I was just unlucky then, huh?" Matthew says, letting out a dry snort.

And Will can't help but think about that. He's seen pictures of the little underground units, but it's only ever the aftermath of when they've been cleared and gutted out. The news hardly ever describes them in detail, and when they do it sounds more like they're describing monsters living under the bed than actual, living beings.

"What was it like?" Will asks. "Living there?"

Matthew looks a little surprised he's being asked a question. It makes sense; he's been on will's bad sad for a better part of a week. Will hasn't bothered with him much besides clipped conversations. "It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't great either. I managed to find it by whispers —they have scouts out on the streets. I don't even know how they knew I was a meta-human, but they'd come scurrying around the dumpier parts of towns just to give crumbs of information. By the time I got to the station, it was almost too overcrowded to take on anyone new. Every two steps you'd be walking over someone's sleeping bag."

Disgust rolls over to Will. It's bitter on his tongue and hurts his throat when he tries to swallow it down. He remembers when Matthew first described the unit. *Pathetic,* he'd said.

"They were two that were the sort of 'leaders' of the group. They tried to keep everything in order, but when you've got a whole room of sick, starving people stuck together—" Matthew shakes his head. "You can imagine how well 'keeping order' went. By the time the M.C.P showed up, it reached a tipping point. People were hoarding away scraps of food. Somebody had taken all the medicine and ran."

Peter, who'd become enthralled with the story, let out a discomforted hum. "Why would they do that?"

Matthew's expression stiffened. His voice is ice cold. "Because they saw a chance of better survival and took it." His mouth twists into a frown. "I'm just sad I didn't think of it first."

Peter seems particularly struck by that. "Wuh- *why?"*

For the most part, Matthew manages to control his snapping tone, keeping it clipped as he says, "Did you miss everything I just said?"

"I think Peter just means that-" Will starts.

For the first time, Matthew looks genuinely angry with him. "I know what he means." His eyes flash to Peter. "You have that idea of 'brotherhood' with the stations, right? That's what you've been told? That all of them are just nice little safe havens for people like us, that they all look out for each other?" Matthew doesn't wait for a response. "Sorry to burst your

bubble, but it's not. It's the same as everywhere else. If you want to survive, you have to put yourself first."

Matthew's gaze hardens. "You have to let everyone know what you're capable of."

In hindsight, after that conversation, Will should have been able to predict what happens next:

They're gathered in the rec room to celebrate New Year's Eve. None of the guards look particularly pleased that they're here rather than with family or friends, but it only comes through as quiet, annoyed sighs and the occasional push when the meta-humans are filed down the hallway from their rooms.

It's not exactly a celebration. People simply stand idly, chatting amiably with one another or watching the TV's, which are all tuned in on the ball-drop. There's only silence at the very last ten seconds, all just watching as the crowd drunkenly whoops and cries when midnight hits. Will wonders whether any of them should be doing the same, or if they even want to. He's never had any particular desire to, but then again he's never had the experience of being on the other side of the screen.

It's about five minutes into the new year when they're herded back towards their rooms. Andrew crowds him in against Peter and a few others, bumping into him with enough force to show that it isn't accidental.

Will already knows that the anger pouring from the edge of the huddle is from Matthew. When he turns to look, the man is almost seething.

"I need to have another talk with him," Will says once they get back to the room. The lights are already starting to dim.

At this point, Peter doesn't need to ask who 'he' is. "He- he isn't the kind to luh-listen."

Will has nothing to say to that. There's nothing he could say to really dispute it; Matthew's held his tongue about Will's supposed 'divinity', but his attitude hasn't changed in the slightest.

Will doesn't sleep. He's too busy trying to think of all the ways he might be able to get it through to the other.

Somewhere in the night, he tosses and turns in frustration. His mind stretches out, inching and twitching as it goes, as he tries to relax. He blankets each room, carefully settling over sleeping minds. The slightest jumps of active dreams don't bother him. It's comforting, in its own odd way. Even if he can't see what they're dreaming about, the feelings are still there. It's all silly little jumps between soft sorrow and joy. Will pours out from their row, out to the other side of the hallway. It's more of the same. One room after the other, after the other—

Until it isn't.

There's a hole in his path. It's a gaping vacuum of white noise. No dreams, no thoughts—nothing. The room isn't empty. It can't be; there wouldn't be that same pull towards it, that nagging to soak up emotional energy like a goddamn sponge.

Will goes still. His mind scrambles to find an explanation, frantically smothering every corner to find a mind there. But there's nothing. Just that buzzing little zone of white noise.

The black mass that breathes against the back of his neck at night suddenly stands in the middle of the room. It's head sways, burdened by its antlers, and stares at Will.

You know what's happening, it seems to say.

Will stares at its beetle-like eyes glinting in the dark, and turns away.

He tries to chalk it up as another tick in his powers, to be later examined and never thought about again. It's very hard to keep that theory when morning comes and the lights remain firmly dimmed, the door never giving its tell-tale pop. There's no ringing for the rec room. They're simply left in their quarters.

Peter paces around all the four corners of the room. Will scoots his bed to the side just to get Peter to stop walking over it.

"Something's wrong," Peter moans, his hands trembling. "Wrong, so- *so wrong."*

All of Will's shaky attempts at reassurance go unheard and unheeded. At some point, he stops trying, just watching Peter going in circles.

Peter only stops when there's the tell-tale click of the door, the pop of the locks becoming undone. Without even a greeting, two guards come inside, flooding into the middle of the room. "There," she says, pointing up to the string-lights hung up around the room. No further instruction is needed, the other guard taking a chair and beginning to tug them down.

Will rises from the bed. "What's going on?"

The guard doesn't even give Will a sideways glance. "Just confiscating items. Nothing you need to worry about."

Peter and Will exchange a look. He's about to ask again, but the guard's hand tightens on the baton at her hip and Will decides it's best to let this pass unquestioned.

The lights are stripped from the walls, pulled away in a giant, tangled ball. Peter makes a final, agonized sound just as they leave. He slumps down onto his bed just as Kevin comes running out from the cabinet, squeaking urgently as he crawls up Peter's leg and into his lap.

The room is dimmer now. At the edges of his vision, where shadows have more room to play, the stag huffs impatiently for Will to let the pieces fall into place.

Recreational Hours are suspended for three days. They are told nothing.

By the third and final day, Will's sure he could cut through Peter's anxiety with a knife.

"You think we're bein' puh-punished?" Peter asks. They're in the bathroom, Peter sitting with his knees to his chest in the tub. Apparently, it's comfortable enough there to keep him from pacing around.

Will doesn't look at him, staring thoughtfully at the white wall ahead. He wrings his hands, picking at a hangnail. "We haven't done anything wrong."

Peter curls up further, his voice muffled against his legs. "Doesn't always matter."

He gives Peter a look, but says nothing. Whatever story is there isn't worth the onslaught of stress it would inevitably bring by telling. His mouth has only just started to lose that hanging, sour taste.

When the quarter doors open, they line up as per usual. Will watches as others spare glances with one another. He feels eyes dart up the line from those in front, counting each head visible. In his own, he tallies up the number of those who realize they're two people short by the mounting fear.

Two rows of chairs wait from them inside the rec room. Some mull around before taking a seat. Will is the first to seat himself. Peter sits to his right, shuffling the chair noisily so that he's a few inches closer to him. Four guards line the wall in front of them. Will can read nothing from them—not because he's being blocked, but because they simply don't seem to care about whatever's about to happen.

Several silent seconds pass before the door (the entrance door, the one that hasn't been touched since any of them got to the Burrow) opens and out steps Alana Bloom in a neat, charcoal suit, papers in hand.

Will tucks his hands under his thighs, palms sweating from the heat and sticky leather. He lets himself slide out, moving strategically beyond his fellow inmates and to Alana. It's easy to pinpoint her weariness—that, he's all too familiar with. It's the grief that has him on edge.

She doesn't look at him at all as she steps to the front. Rustling papers break the quiet, Alana's eyes darting over whatever lines she's been fed, and then speaks.

"It…I'm here today to be the bearer of bad news. Some of you may have noticed that you've been knocked down from twenty-five to twenty-three in the past few days." Alana looks down again, eyebrows pinching together. Composure is gained easily once again. "On Thursday morning, we were devastated to find that, after somehow disabling the cameras and knocking his roommate Elise Nichols unconscious, Andrew Sykes hung himself in his room."

The rows burst in shock. Murmurs are shared amongst them. Peter reaches out and grabs his arm in a painfully tight grip.

“Ms. Nichols is currently having outside therapy sessions, and will hopefully return a week from now.” The papers find their way to Alana’s side. She looks out at them all, the air of professionality fading, morphing into genuine concern. “If there’s anyone else who’d like to have outside sessions, contact your workers. And if you’re ever falling into some dark place, ever considering suicide or having suicidal thoughts….*Please* tell us. Tell anyone. We have an entire team of professionals standing by that want to help you.” Her gaze stops, tacking firmly onto Will. “You don’t have to suffer in silence.”

After that, they all bow their heads for a few minutes of solemn silence. Will finds it’s hard to sit still, the room alive and buzzing with emotions. The shock has moved onto some kind of knowing; it was really only a matter of time before someone got sick of their less than ideal situation and did something about it. Being treated as a means for an end, even in a cushy environment, could mess with anyone’s psyche. A relief filters through that, and Will is sure if he could read minds it would be accompanied by the thought of: *At least I wasn’t the first to snap.*

Beyond that, it’s a mix. No one’s affected too heavily, but there’s a lingering sadness still. The loss of a human life, even one they didn’t really know, is still a *loss.* Andrew’s family will probably never know about his true fate.

(realistically, no one will. It’s more than likely that on paper, Andrew Sykes’ been legally dead for a few years now)

Will doesn’t linger too long on any of them, reeling back in again. It’s a shame, really, that he misses the bright, smug little spot seated in the midst of all that grieving.

Will expects to be pulled aside for a ‘private meeting’, so it’s no surprise when guards come to escort him to the usual ‘not-an-interrogation-room-but-still-set-up-like-an-interrogation-room’ in the back. Alana doesn’t waste any time; she barely even lets him sit down before she starts asking questions. “Did you know?”

“I could feel it,” Will nods. “I didn’t know what happened, but there was a blank. I knew somebody died, just…not how they did.”

“No, I mean….did you *know?”* She presses. “Were you getting any signs from him? Doing something like that, that sort of emotion couldn’t have been subtle.”

That actually catches Will; he rises up in his seat a little, trying to retrace his time here. He hadn’t exactly spent a lot of time with Andrew, even if the other had made him a target in the Burrow. For the most part, he’d actively avoided having any encounter or contact with the man. But Alana was right—something like that would have been hard to miss, even with Will’s careful maneuvering. “The strongest thing I got from him was anger.”

She looks down, her mouth pressing into a thin line. “Do you think he would have done this out of spite? To send a message, something like that?”

“Send a message to who? The M.C.P? The rest of us?”

“Maybe he wanted to be a martyr.”

“That usually involves having some kind of cause,” Will says. The thought crops up that his vendetta against Will may have been that cause, but he brushes it aside easily. It wouldn’t make sense, especially since he seemed determined to raise hell for him personally. Even if it did, he’s still not about to bring up it up. “I don’t think I’m up to being your emotional sniffer dog if that’s what you’re leading up to.”

Alana doesn’t look as stricken by his accusation as she should. It’s clear that the thoughts at least crossed her mind. “I’m not. I know you’ve got your own things going on. I’m just saying, if you think you sense something….”

“Say something.” Will finishes dully. “I’ve got it.”

He returns to his room in silence. Peter doesn’t ask him where he went or who he talked to, preoccupied with trying to get Kevin to come out from his hole in the wall. Will just watches for a while before saying, “You’re probably projecting your fear onto him. Just ease up, he’ll come to you.”

Peter shakes his head. His hands are cupped to the floor, right outside the hole, silently beckoning his furry friend out. “He knows some-something’s wrong. I know he nuh-knows.” He lets out a low hum. “Bad things.”

Peter stays there on the ground for the rest of the day. He even sets up his pillows and blankets by the hole just before the lights go out.

Morning comes. When Will wakes and checks up on Peter, he sees the mouse sheltered underneath the man’s hand.

There are four people missing by the time rec hours resume. Peter’s a ball of anxiety throughout, closing his eyes and fiddling with his fingers even after they’ve settled onto the couches. Will’s entirely unsure of what to do, only keeping at Peter’s side (and occasionally doing a quick glance around the room to check if Katherine has moved any closer from where she’s watching them both like a hawk).

He hasn’t bothered to turn the TV on. It’d be impossible to focus on anything besides Peter right now, and he doesn’t want to seem callous by paying attention to some blabbering anchor than his friend. “Tell me about your animals.”

Peter gives him a look, the kind that tells him he knows that Will’s just trying to distract him, but speaks anyways. “T-There was a couple of rats. Nice rats—clean ones, not like, uh, sewer ones. And cats. Always separate from rats.” Peter says. “Didn’t wanna have- have favorites, but I had one anyway.”

Will can’t help but smile a little. “What was its name?”

“Fuh-Foggy. He was sorta a gray, but not *dark.* Just misty, y’know?”

Will hums. In the corner of his eye, there's motion. He doesn't pay it any mind, even though he knows it's coming their way (he can feel the threat of smugness there, the familiar kinship that doesn't belong). "What about the horses from before? Was there a favorite?"

Peter actually eases at that. The memory of the stables always puts him in a good mood. He even sounds fond the few times he recounts being kicked in the head. "Oh, yeah. Maple. Pretty mare, always fuh-friendly. Loved carrots."

The figure is right there on the edge of Will's vision. Peter stops and frowns, that same anxiety creeping its way back into his posture. "Will," Matthew says, voice ecstatic in his ear.

Will waves a hand at him. "Not now. Peter—you said she liked carrots?"

"Yuh- yes." Peter's eyes dart back and forth.

"This is a little more important than some horses, Will."

Excitement is jumping off Matthew when he finally looks at him. "We were having a conversation. Can't it wait?"

Matthew shakes his head. He's practically vibrating out of his own skin, seeming halfway ready to jump over the arm of the couch and sidle up right against Will. "It's about Andrew —"

A ripple of fear washes over Will, along with a terrible kind of foreboding. Will's expression drops entirely, and as he pushes back Peter's emotions, he sends out a wave of iciness to Matthew. "Not now."

Matthew leans forward, almost till their nose to nose. *"Yes,* now."

It's getting to be too much. There are harsher things he wants to say, nastier ways he wants to go about this, but he has to keep calm. Control is key if he wants to keep from projecting on Peter. "I'm not about to gossip about a man's death." He's close to spitting. "If you don't have anything else—"

"Don't you want to know how he died?"

Matthew's voice is a whisper. Still, it's loud enough for Peter to hear—Will knows this because the other man takes hold of his wrist in a death-grip, spindly fingers near-bruising. His own mind came to a stand-still, carefully picking apart the sentence, Matthew's tone, the rush of adrenaline that pumped through unwillingly shared veins. "Suicide," Will says. "You were there. You heard it."

He's taken the bait. Matthew's smile flickers into something predatory. "That's what they're saying but I," he breathes, right into Will's face. "I know the truth of it."

There's something there. Darker than before. Will feels that same chill of foreboding, but this time it is entirely his own.

(another huff of hot air hits his cheek; antlers grow further, thick and tangling his vision)

Each beat of his heart feels heavier, slower. “What’s the truth, then?”

Matthew’s pupils are blown wide, all light sucked out of them. “He didn’t belong here anymore. He disturbed the peace that we all wanted here.” Matthew’s tone takes the turn for serious. “He disturbed the peace we made. He didn’t just put a target on your back. Peter was on their radar too, everyone who decided to speak to you was. Because of him, this place went from a unit to this divided playground, this- this mob mentality.” Matthew shakes his head.

Another slight shift. Matthew leans up further. “They trust me, here. I’ve never made any trouble for them. People like us, we know how to play by their rules, right? So it’s easy to find that wiggle room, those blind spots where they won’t even suspect us starting to bend their expectations.”

“What did you do?” Will can’t look away from Matthew. His face is jagged, eyes separated from his mouth, nose cut in half by antlers.

It’s the question he’s been looking for. “I acted to protect what you’ve made here. What *you* created. I did you, *us,* a favor.” Matthew’s stare bores into him. He raises his hand, and for a moment it isn’t a hand at all. His fingers have been ghostly, rippling out of sight so that it’s only a smoky visage of a palm and fingers. Matthew looks it over almost fondly, turning it either which way so that Will can see every angle. “You don’t have to repay it, though. Don’t worry. I’m always happy to do a favor for a friend.”

It isn’t hard to put together. Will’s mind puts it together helpfully for him, taking what he’s been giving and planning it all out carefully in his mind.

There’s surveillance in nearly every spot in the Burrow; the meta-humans placed here have privileges, but security like that is still needed. Except for places of privacy, like the bathrooms. No cameras, no microphones, only a speaker set up at the corner of the room. It’s not like there would be much to see in there, and the vents aren’t big enough for any grown person to try and fit through.

Smoke, on the other hand— that can pass through just fine.

Fiddling with a camera wouldn’t be so hard in the dark. Once that’s done, everything is so impossibly easy. Hitting a sleeping woman over the head, suffocating a man without even having to grab his throat, dangling his body with sheets—

It’s simple.

It’s sick.

Most importantly: *it’s for Will.*

He’s absolutely still. There has to be some kind of rational response to this, some calm way to talk Matthew down. The best option would be to accept this, take the information to Alana, and wait for Matthew to be taken out from the Burrow and back into proper M.C.P custody.

The danger would be gone and, hopefully, things could return back to the routine ease before Matthew had shown up in his life.

Peter's voice shakes. "Huh-How could you-?"

Matthew's expression drops. "I always have to repeat myself around you." He lets out as a slight hiss, then cocks his head. "Do I have to speak more clearly for you? A little slower?"

It's very unfortunate then that Will absorbs all the righteousness, pride and impetuosity, and rather forcefully guides his fist to Matthew's face.

There's a moment where everything seems to slow, growing quiet as Will falls back into himself, focused on the dull ache in his knuckles and the way his wrist feels odd when he grips it. It's only for a moment, though, his senses exploding back out to the rest of the room for the onslaught of reactions that come.

All Will can see is Andrew Sykes, scrabbling at his own throat as Matthew shoves his own indignant ideology down it. His purpling face, and the slight feeling of hope that might come before Matthew pulled the sheets tight around his neck and forced his feet right off the ground.

The stag nudges at him none too gently, forcing him off the couch and down to Matthew. It doesn't force his fist up again, though. Each time he does, it's of his own volition.

Another sharp pang in his hand has him confused for just a moment before he checks himself. The scene is laid out like this:

Peter is behind him, tugging furiously as his shoulder.

Matthew is beneath him, laughing wetly against the blood bubbling up from his split lip, the few drops that trickle down from the open wound on his cheek.

A guard is above him, a baton stretched out in the space between them.

It takes very little effort to roll off of Matthew and push himself away, right into the grip of the guard. Will's too frazzled to properly block out the rolling pain coming from him and flinches when he feels a sting right along his jaw and cheek.

(briefly, he wonders what his hands might look like underneath the gloves, if his knuckles have split open or if the leather saved both Matthew and himself).

"Get *up."* The guard strikes his calf. Will is quick to comply, standing and raising his hands. He keeps his head down, eyes fixed on his shoes. There's no need to look up and see the crowd that's trying to gather, held back by the few other guards stationed in the room. Peter's already been guided away; beyond the pounding of his own heart, he can hear the mans stammered protests, sentences tripping out of his mouth as he tries to explain what had happened, what Matthew was.

"He killed him!" Peter manages to spit out.

One of the guards gently prods Matthew's side, getting another weak huff out of him. "He's alive. Nelson, get him over to the infirmary. You—" He looks over Will and opens his mouth, but hesitates. A glance is given to one of the other guards. "Get Dr. Bloom on the line. She can deal out a punishment for this."

The thought of solitary is much more comforting than getting another talking-to by Alana. He considers fighting with the guard that grips his shoulder just on the off-chance they'll throw him in, but ultimately decides it isn't worth it. He lets himself be guided through the crowd and out the door, though keeps his pace to a mild amble.

There are a few things running through his head. The first isn't Alana, surprisingly enough, but the fact that this is the first time he's actually hit someone. It's not like he's never thought of himself as incapable of violence. Killing people is an inherently violent act, whether or not he's done it intentionally in the past. But hitting them, drawing blood— it's not something he'd ever thought he'd do mainly because he'd never felt anything stronger than a slight twinge of annoyance here and there.

The other thing is what might happen to him. Going to one of those private therapy sessions seems like the option Alana will opt for. Chilton will be more than happy to take him back, especially after getting the news that he had a physical outburst.

Will lets out a heavy sigh just as the door behind them opens again. He looks over his shoulder to see Matthew being shouldered along. Their eyes lock and the other man smiles, forcing another bead of blood to run down from the little cut on his cheek, reddening his smile further.

The guard holding Will turns fully. "Nelson, wait for me to bring this guy to the back. Just keep Brown over in—"

The hallway around them suddenly trembles. It only lasts for a few seconds, but no one moves. Will looks up to see a few of the lights flickering, casting odd shadows over the line of doors ahead.

"Earthquake?" Nelson. The other shrugs. A minute or two passes and ease makes its way into the hall as its simply assumed whatever has happened is over. It's a very stupid assumption on everyone's part when the second round of tremors hit, rumbling all around them. Will moves to the wall for a bit of balance, pressing his shoulder and palm against it. He's extremely thankful that he did so, considering the next moment the shaking intensifies to the point where he can barely stand.

Above them, one of the light fixtures swings out of place, swinging and just barely missing Matthew by an inch. While the guard jumps out of the way, he half-phases into smoke, letting the next swing pass through him entirely. A cacophony of noise sounds from either of the guard's radios, static noise that can only barely be interpreted as voices. While the message is intelligible, the tone makes it clear that something is very, very wrong and that no, it isn't an earthquake.

The door to the rec room, still ajar, swings open. From within it looks like the rest of the meta-humans have been herded to a corner, all anxiously looking up and around to try and

find the source of all this commotion. The guard next to Will touches the radio on her shoulder. “Does anyone read?” She pauses for a moment for the answering static. *“Hello? Does anyone-?”*

Another rumble rips through them. At the end of the hall, another light falls to the ground, electricity zapping from the exposed wires. The radio lets out a shriek of noise, disjointed and garbled. Only one jagged makes it through: *“Get them out!”*

The guard pauses, sharing a look with her companion. “Are you-?”

“GET THEM OUT.”

No more questions are asked. The look between the two officers becomes stony, but the hint of fear isn’t lost on Will. Nelson makes to grab Matthew’s shoulder, he phases through, pressing against the door. “Out where? What’s happening?”

It’s obvious no one knows. Nothing is clear, especially with the accompanying silence. Still, Matthew continues to slip from Nelson's grasp, frustrating him to the point where he starts to whip his baton through the smoky, vaguely human pillar that Matthew had become.

“It’s not safe in here,” Will tries to reason, but the moment he opens his mouth he’s hit on the leg once again. Not hard, and it seems less like a warning and more just a reflex. The guard doesn’t even look at him as she does it. He ignores it, though. Matthew isn’t going to listen to the guards—even if just minutes ago Will was beating him, he still has a better chance at talking him into moving. “We need to go, someone’s going to get hurt.”

He’s spoken a little too late. The door swings wildly again, knocking Nelson into the wall and then trapping him there. The guard by Will’s side takes only a seconds pause before quickly coming to his aid, Matthew moving out of the way as she shoves the door out of the way and assessing the damage.

It’s enough time for Will to get moving without being hit or having to explain. He moves to the door, only to stop when Matthew solidifies, effectively blocking the door. “You’re falling into a trap here if you’re going back to that huddle.”

Will doesn’t bite. “Move.”

“Whatever this is, it’s a chance to get out. You’re not just going to skip over this kind of opportunity, are you?”

“Move.”

Matthew cocks his head. “Whatever you had back there, it’s fine! We can talk about it later when we’re above ground.”

The distinct urge to punch him comes over Will again. There’s not much time to act on it; the crowd beyond the door suddenly scrambles to another corner, howling and shrieking as the other side of the room is torn wide open.

They’re both rocked forwards by the force of it, Matthew knocking into Will’s chest as they stumble. Will doesn’t even attempt to push him off or to even right himself, left to stare at the gaping hole that reveals what was once a heavily fitted garage and now merely a playground of twisted metal and rubble. He almost doesn’t notice the bodies strewn around, the dark puddles scattered in odd places on the ground. It’s easy to, especially with the group that likely caused all of it standing right at the now nonexistent barrier between them and the rec room.

It isn’t an army that stands beyond, but only a group of three. The front lines consist of two women. The blonde is dressed far more casually than an event like this calls for, with only a red blouse, dark pants and a clean pair of boots. She only seems relatively unalarmed by the commotion. Her companion, on the other hand, is absolutely void of any emotion. Her stance is solid, defensive, geared up in an armored black uniform. The man, dressed in similar garb, is unreadable in face and body.

When Matthew turns to look at them, he goes absolutely still. His features twist into a smile, slow but sure and the hum of excitement feels unusual against the mounting terror. He grabs onto Will tightly, letting out a shaky breath. “It’s him.”

A guard suddenly moves out from the huddle, brandishing his gun. *“Get on the ground!”* He barks. “Get on the ground, or I shoot!”

“Who?” Will asks.

Matthew’s smile looks like it's about to rip his face in half. “The Ripper.”

The man—*the Ripper*, doesn't even flinch, but merely inclines his head. “Chiyoh, if you would?”

The woman, Chiyoh, gives the barest of nods before pulling out a pocket on her leg, a silver blade flashing against the light. She flips it once in her hand before throwing it, and it soars through the air at an impossible speed right into the guard's chest. He fires off a round into the ceiling out of shock before dropping, but the blade doesn’t go with him. Instead, it surges out from his body and zips through the room into the throats, chests or heads of every other officer standing.

As the other meta-humans cry in alarm at the dead men and women at their feet, the blade flies back to Chiyoh’s hand. In one slick motion, she wipes it clean against the crook of her arm and deposits it back into its sheath.

The blonde looks over the mess with some distaste. She turns to the Ripper, expression a little pinched. “Was that necessary?”

“Would you have preferred a bullet?” Chiyoh sniffs back as she moves forward, managing to step rather gracefully between rubble and bodies. The Ripper follows silently after her, each corpse reflecting on the surface of his helmet. The other woman is hesitant but eventually steps in place behind them.

For nearly the entire time, Will has only been able to stare at them. He doesn't even feel them; some primal instinct has stepped in for his own self-preservation and curled his senses back.

It's just nearly, though, because his attention is brought to the side at the flicker of movement that isn't Matthew. The guards from before are still there against the wall, one cradling his broken nose and the other peering out through the door. The only real option they have is to shuffle out along the wall to one of the back rooms. There's still a chance they'll be found, yes, but it's better than being only a few feet away from their possible soon-to-be killers.

The huddle of meta-humans has the groups attention now. They need to get moving before it wavers. Will steps out slightly from Matthews grip, but the other man hardly seems to notice, absolutely taken with the sight ahead of them. For a moment, Will debates trying to help them at all. They haven't done anything for him—they've just been the wardens in a dressed-up prison. Letting them be found wouldn't be the worst thing in the world and he's sure that any sadness would pass within just a few minutes.

Still. What goodness in him calls for at least an attempt to be made. Carefully, Will stretches his hand out, placing it on the wall. This close, he's sure he can feel their hearts racing.

"I know this all may appear alarming, but there's no reason for you to be afraid." The Ripper's voice echoes out. It comes out almost augmented from the helmet, but still, an accent hangs on the edge of it. "You will not be harmed if you do not present yourselves as threats."

Will shifts his foot to press against Nelson's leg. His eyes are wide, blood still spilling down from his cupped hands, and he seems to lurch back a little when Will presses harder. He tips his head, gesturing silently to the end of the hallway.

"We are here as your saviors today. No thanks is needed, but your cooperation in our endeavors after this is necessary. Some of you may know who I am and know what I'm going to ask of you. Some of you may not. In time, that will be explained to you."

It takes Nelson a few seconds to understand, eyes lighting up. He nods, nudging his partner softly and pointing from the back door, to Will, and then to the two of them. She doesn't seem to get it until Will starts stepping in front of them, offering a bit of cover. It's not much, but it's the only thing he has to offer.

They begin the slow crawl down the hall, a few droplets of blood marking their path down. Will eases just slightly, enough so that he unfurls a few feet. He can pinpoint Peter in the crowd, thankfully placed somewhere near the back. He can feel the newcomers, too, but it's…different. Warped. Or at the very least, Chiyoh's is. From the Ripper, he can feel nothing even as he delivers his speech. From the other woman—

He inhales sharply as an oddly familiar presence prods and wriggles against his senses, making its way through his barriers and settling home.

"Hannibal," her voice is followed by the soft step of boots. "There's some left." She's at the door, leaning in through. Will's cover does nothing to stop the way her gaze instantly settles

onto the two guards, who stop and look in turn. Matthew steps out of the way for her entirely, but any reverence is saved for the Ripper who nearly stalks in behind her. He casts a terrible shadow down the hall, looming over the fetal figures along the wall.

Will whirls around as both jump to their feet, bolting towards the door. Before they can even make it, that shadow is right in front of them. Nelson pauses only for a moment before pulling out his gun and firing two rounds into his chest. Each bullet bounces right off and onto the floor. The Ripper reaches out and grabs the barrel of the gun, crushing it between his fingers. He goes further, taking Nelson's wrist and squeezing.

The crack of bones is followed quickly by a guttural scream. Nelson crumples, sobbing in agony. Any sympathy the other guard might've had for him is gone as she tries to squeeze past the small space between the wall and the Ripper. This too is a mistake; his free hand snatches her by the throat in an instant, lifting her from the ground entirely. She struggles only for a moment before her neck is snapped cleanly by his palm, her body falling with a limp thud once she's released.

He can't help but stare into her lifeless eyes, the way her heads sitting at such an odd angle on the floor. Will wonders if that's how he looks to other people. His gaze just listless, nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

Another snap and the end of the screaming signals the final death. Will's eyes meet the surface of the helmet to find his own wild reflection staring back.

The writhing feeling in his skull comes back again, sifting through his thoughts and memories. He's never felt a telepathic invasion, but this seems close enough to it. *Out,* he projects into the room, twitching when it simply drives in further.

His walls aren't working but that's not his only defense. Will closes his eyes, breathing harshly out through his nose. He extends himself out to where he can vaguely find that buzzing psychic energy. He forces himself onto it, hooking into the edges and tugging. He finds the culprit easily, the pain far easier to pinpoint.

The blonde is still in the doorway, though she does take a slight step back when he looks at her. He grits his teeth, the leather crunching as his hands ball into fists. "Stay *out."*

From the corner, Matthew suddenly becomes animated. "Do you know who you're talking to?" When Will offers only a half-assed shrug, Matthew lets out a huffing kind of laugh. "Do you really not know who she is?"

Will looks at her head-on this time, but he still can't place her. Matthew seems absolutely alarmed by this, continuing to laugh as he combs a hand through his hair. The woman ignores his antics completely, apparently not very determined to explain herself either. Her attention seems to be solely on Will and further prying into his mind despite his protests. Even when he presses harder at her, she doesn't shy away.

He physically startles as brief visions of his own life playing like a transparent film over his own eyes. This is a violation of a different breed—even as he pulls himself back to try and fight off his invisible attacker, every mental claw and scratch feels useless. He'd never been

trained to fight against another meta-human like this. Even if he had been, he's not even sure his empathetic abilities would be able to provide a proper defense against something like this.

Will staggers to the middle of the hall, pressing his palm deep into his temple. "What're you doing to me?" He hisses, blinded momentarily by the image of Alana's concerned face and the phantom feeling of a needle pricking the back of his neck.

The woman lets out a hushing sound. More memories pass by him; the sensation of floating in a dream, the rocking panic of being locked away, the annoyance of speaking with Chilton. Fresher ones crop up too— the stag blots his sight at every corner, dark and righteous in each moment. Will can't help but let out a sharp whine as the most recent is plucked out and presented before his attacker. She's delicate with it, caressing the rage that had compelled him to fight Matthew, watching through his own eyes as he beat the other man.

Did you like it? Her voice is quiet and without judgment. *Seeing the blood rise to the surface? The pain it brought you?*

Will has no choice but to answer. *Yes.*

The visions stop. His sight clears, but his head still feels disoriented as the woman's influence seeps out. They seem to breathe in tune as the forced connection is broken.

"Oh," she says, ever so soft, ever so curious. "That's interesting."

At those simple words, the wild, trembling thing that's been sitting in Will's chest since this all started suddenly *snaps.*

He lunges without thinking, hands outstretched and waiting to grip her arm, her shoulder, anything he can get a hold of that might provide exposed skin. The source of his nightmares lies right here. Every terrible moment spent in his head since then stands before him and just asks to die. The blonde woman looks momentarily surprised, but not scared. She doesn't need to be. Like the guards, he's stopped before he really gets anywhere, caught by his throat midair. Fingers squeeze into the sides of his neck, his feet kicking out and barely reaching the floor as he's lifted just a hint higher. His mind rattles to rationalize how fast the Ripper might be moving, but that wonder is quickly overturned for a greater need, like how he's going to get oxygen back.

He rips off one of his own gloves, naked palm searching the surface of lightly armored clothing. The other seems unaffected by any and all of his attempts, lifting him an inch higher instead. "Will Graham." His tone is casual, ignoring all of the heady gasps. "I had hoped we'd meet under different circumstances."

If he could breathe, Will would laugh. Unfortunately, what's left of his strength is going into battering the Ripper in any way that he can and even that is growing weaker by the second. The helmet tilts to the side and he's forced to see his own twitching mouth, along with the blood creating an ugly flush all over his face.

He barely hears Chiyoh from beyond the sound of his own heartbeat. "You might kill him."

The Ripper only hums. His grip tightens. “Give it a moment.”

Will grips his bicep, legs jerking out of control beneath him. Something like a whimper is forced out, spit dribbling out from the corner of his mouth along with it. Black blotches up everything as his hands finally fall to his sides. Only then does the pressure begin to ease, but he has no energy to rally himself into fighting again. “Not to worry, Will.” The Ripper says as he fades out, bit by bit. “You’re in very good hands.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> “What I’d like to come from this is an agreement. An exchange. I wouldn’t ask anything of you without giving in return.” His eyes narrow just slightly. “Technically I have given but, from what I understand, you don’t necessarily see your liberation as something that needs to be repaid.”
>
> Will snorts. “Liberation? You tore down a building, threatened our group, almost strangled me to death, and now you’ve got everyone stuck in some underground bunker asking for favors. I wouldn’t call that something as righteous as liberation.”

Chapter Notes

> We're finally back folks. Another schedule screwed over and another chapter released way later than intended (mainly because finding Hannibal's voice is a game of trying to sound pretentious but not too ridiculous and....it's killing me already).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“—and how long?”

“About eight hours. He overdid it.”

“He’s been showing a particular lack of restraint these days.” A sigh. “But what about-?”

“The throat is fine. Not crushed, just bruised.”

A hand traces his jaw. It presses down gently, though the sting of it forces a grunt out of Will.

“He’ll want an eye kept on that.”

“His own?”

“Once he’s done throwing out the welcome mat, yes. I think he wants to keep this… contained.”

The touch retreats. Will shifts slightly, using what strength he has to crack an eye open. A film settles over his vision, leaving the ceiling (or whatever it is he might be looking at) fuzzy and indistinguishable. His senses begin to unwind, practically clawing their way through the room to try and understand what’s going on.

“He’s waking up,” a familiar voice says, nearly interrupted by the other: *“You should leave.”*

By the time he can open both eyes, he can feel only one person in the room. Before he moves, he takes stock of what he can feel, can see. The ceiling is a dingy brown. No lights are directly worked into it, instead hanging freely by wires, crisscrossing overhead. The bed beneath him is firm and springy. His hands are bare, gloveless. A distinct dampness hangs in the air and he doesn’t know how, but everything almost smells *muddy.* When he sits upright and scans the rest of the room, he sees that it’s not an infirmary; actually, it’s quite small with only enough space to fit a few chairs and a beat-up desk— and, of course, Chiyoh.

She’s seated in a chair not far from the bed and dressed far more casually than before. Instead of armored clothing, she’s dressed in a simple green shirt and loose black pants, though the boots are the same as before (and he can’t help but notice that despite the slight humidity, she’s wearing long sleeves and gloves). She looks almost…soft. Unassuming. Or at least she would have if Will hadn’t watched her kill six guards without even touching them.

“Where-“ Will starts to croak, wincing at the soreness that hits.

“Save your voice,” Chiyoh says.

It’s sound advice. Being choked isn’t exactly very kind on the vocal cords and keeping quiet might well save him some future pain. Will clears his throat and forces the question out anyway. *“Where* am I?”

Chiyoh’s eyes narrow. She keeps quiet long enough that Will sighs and goes to ask again, though is interrupted before he can get a breath out. “This is an underground station in Virginia. I can’t disclose much more than that.”

Will sits up straighter. “Why not?”

“Because that’s all the information you need to know. For now, at least.”

“Is that what the,” Will’s throat flexes uncomfortably. “The Ripper told you to say?”

He hasn’t forgotten what’s happened. Actually, all of the events seem like they’re burned right into his brain. The image of the Ripper’s helmet, dull and black and glinting occasionally with the flickering lights, is seared onto the backs of his eyelids. He’s here because the Ripper wants him to be. Chiyoh’s here because the Ripper told her to be. He isn’t naïve enough to believe that any of this isn’t strictly done by his design. The way that Chiyoh doesn’t even seem fazed by the question cements that much. “Not word for word, no. He would like to explain things to you himself.”

Will snorts. “Is that his way of comforting his hostages? Giving them a personal tour of their new cage?”

Any slight expression in her face vanishes. She leans forward in her chair, unintentionally pushing a quiet anger Will’s way. “Hannibal is many things, but he is not your captor.”

“What would you call someone who strangled you then brought your unconscious, unwilling body to his secret hidey-hole?”

“He acted to save one of our own,” She says firmly. “I do not always condone his actions, but you would have caused more trouble than we could afford if you had stayed awake.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

She stares at him for a good few seconds, her gaze heated before it simmers back down to the same neutrality from before. “You have already made up your mind about him. I cannot convince you of anything. The only person who can change it is Hannibal.”

It dawns on Will that she’s only been calling him by (what he can assume) is his real name. It doesn’t have the same flair as the Ripper, but it’s not as boring or anticlimactic as John or Mark or Will. “So, *Hannibal*,” he tests out the name slowly. “Wants a private audience?”

“Something like that. He has already spoken to the others.”

“Individually?” Will asks.

“No.” And that’s all she gives, leaving it to him to understand the weight behind that simple word.

He should feel scared. He should be shaking with some kind of anxious feeling, have jittery fingers or rushing thoughts. All of those things are very natural reactions to learning that an overpowered meta-human who has a knack for mass murder wants to meet with him face-to-face. But all he does is sit in his cot, staring off beyond Chiyoh’s head and trying with a mild amount of effort to remember what it was that Hannibal had said while strangling the life out of him. All that comes out from his wonderings is a soft, *Huh.* “You’re not going to tell me why he’s giving me special treatment, are you?”

Chiyoh blinks at him.

Will sits back and stares at the ceiling. “Thought so.”

He glances down as the chair creaks and is able to catch Chiyoh getting to her feet. “I will be the one to escort you to Hannibal later.” She says. “We may see Bedelia on our way there. Will you be able to control yourself this time?”

Will frowns. “Bedelia?” It takes only a moment for the name to click with the context and when it does, his expression snaps to something darker. “You mean the one who snuck inside my head? Who planted some-“ He gestures wildly, nearly knocking his temple. “Some nightmarish bullshit in there when I had my guard down?”

“Yes, that one.”

“I can’t make any promises.” Will shakes his head. “Especially not after you just confirmed that she did those things to me.”

“Her actions are more justified than you would like to believe.” Chiyoh opens the door, pausing long enough to speak. “But just as before, I doubt I will be able to change your mind.” And then she goes, leaving him in a damp little room. He watches the door for a few seconds after, waiting for her to possibly return or for someone else to take her place. Neither happens.

Will has never been one to really take any direct action. Where he’s told to go, he goes. What he’s told to do, he does. It’s been the only way to make his continued survival work well and without trouble. If he put that method into place here, he would simply lay there and wait for Chiyoh to come back. He wouldn’t run the risk of punishment or anger or a possible strangling later by remaining idle. However, he can’t ignore the nagging urge to *move* and the quiet reminder that the same rules hardly apply in a place like this.

He shifts his weight around on the bed, testing for any creaks or rusty whines before getting to his feet. He doesn’t bother to check around the room again-- there’s nothing for him to grab. His gloves are nowhere to be seen and the only thing that’s even his is the jumpsuit he’s wearing. He moves quickly to the door, pulling on the makeshift handle experimentally. It nearly comes off right along with the door, which is hanging for dear life to a wooden support beam. From behind the door, he can fully hear the cacophony of voices that had only been a muted buzz from the bed. When he cracks the door open, all he can see is a swarm of moving bodies.

It only takes a second for him to slip out of the room and right into the crowd. Getting caught into the stream of people is incredibly easy as well as incredibly uncomfortable. He’s immediately squared into a group, arms, chests, and backs pressing into all sides of him. He pushes the person in front of him on instinct alone, falling back into the one behind him as the man whips around and snarls at him. Really, *snarls* at him—fanged teeth jutting out from his lips and a low growl rumbling from his chest. *“Watch it!”* He snaps, a fleck of spit flying and hitting Will’s jaw.

He’s able to mutter an apology before stumbling his way out from the huddle, pressing himself against the nearest wall. The soil feels cool against his skin, allowing Will something to anchor himself down and finally see what’s going on around him.

The room isn’t so much that as just a very large corridor. It’s a single stretch with makeshift doors, open entrances or curtains lined up on the walls. People dart in and out from either side, most doing so with a purpose, holding some sort of supplies or food. Will can’t help but think of them as worker bees zipping around their hive with only one thing in mind: *survive.* He snorts when he realizes that’d make the Ripper their queen.

When he pushes himself into the room this time he manages to avoid being sucked into another stream, weaving through people to look at where any door might lead. Finding a way out is impossible and thankfully it’s not his goal. Right now, Will needs to get a lay of the land. He moves through each door that he can see on the corridor, finding rec rooms, bathrooms, actual infirmaries, and a room full of bunk beds and cots. Nothing is luxurious, but it’s a fair share better than anything Matthew had described.

At the end of the corridor, drives right, pushing back a thin curtain and entering what looks like a giant food pantry. Cans, bottles and labeled boxes are just about everywhere, though

only a few are picking through them. Most are lined up in front of a desk, all being seen by a woman who's skin is a few shades pinker than normal. She smiles at everyone who comes up, saying some gentle greeting and hands over a bottle of water and a can. Will watches a man break open his can just as he leaves the line, scarfing down a couple of beans.

The sight's enough to remind his stomach that he hadn't gotten to have his lunch or dinner and that it's not happy about that routine being broken. Placing a placating hand over his middle, Will eyes the line in front of him. It doesn't seem like that much of a risk. From the people he's seen, there's got to be at least a hundred that filter in and out of this room daily. The woman won't be able to remember all of them, especially not when the Ripper was bringing in more every now and then. The risk isn't very calculated, but Will can't see the real harm in it. He ducks into the line, waiting patiently till he can step in front of the desk.

The woman looks up at him kindly. When she smiles, he notices that her teeth are sharpened to a point. "How many cans?"

"One." Will says, then adds, "Please."

She nods and plucks up a clipboard from behind her desk, eyes darting over the list. "I ain't seen you here before. You with the new ones?" She asks. Her smile widens when he nods quietly, expression just a bit softer. "Oh, hun. Don't you worry, it's all a 'lil scary right now, but you'll get your footin'. We all do. Now," she taps the clipboard. "I probably got you somewhere on the registry. They're good about the updates. What's your name?"

Will, put at ease by the knowledge that he has some kind of cover, offers a twitching grin. "Will Graham."

It's like he's just smacked her in the face. She looks up at him, smile disappearing as he's hit by a wave of *shock-fear*. She sets the clipboard down, leaning as far back in her chair as possible. She speaks, but it's more of a squeak, incoherent but giving him the impression that it's time to leave. He steps to the side, nearly out of the line. "I think I'll just-"

She stands quickly, the clipboard knocked out of the way. "No, *wait—"*

Will ducks his head as he walks to the door, ignoring the few voices chiming for him to stop. His pace picks up as soon as he's back into the hall and allows himself to be sucked into the vacuum of people. When he looks over his shoulder, he sees a group four is pushing to get to him, the woman in the lead. They look over and into the hall, searching desperately around.

Getting lost in the crowd isn't an option anymore; Will shoves at others to get through, running through the door to the infirmary. There are not too many people in there, but there's still the buzz of motion and better than that, there are other doorways. He skirts past nurses and sickbeds, eyes flicking between the ground and the next few escape routes he has up ahead. The plan to make a beeline there is crushed when he chances a look behind him to see the search party coming through the door.

He sidesteps behind a medical curtain and remains absolutely still. "Hi," Will says awkwardly.

“Hi?” The man in the sickbed echoes back. “Are you a nurse?”

Carefully, Will peered from the curtains. The woman from before is speaking to a few nurses, making a few panicked hand gestures. The nurses themselves look more than concerned. “Not really.” Will doesn’t wait for any more questions. He books it from the curtains to the nearest exit at the left. He’s pushed into another crowd of people, but he doesn’t try to stick with it. Instead, he pushes on past them from door to door, moving quickly and quietly through each. His mind curls in on itself in something very close to panic and tells him to just *run.*

Slowly but surely, the people begin to thin. The rooms he passes become smaller until it’s only just different hallways and corridors. He hardly notices it till he’s found himself well and truly lost in the maze of underground tunnels. Only when there’s not a single soul to be found does Will allow himself to stop. Ahead and behind him lie tunnels, lights flickering in and out. Wherever it is that he’s gotten himself to, it obviously isn’t getting much attention. A cursory glance is given to see if he’s still being followed before Will begins to walk.

He’s voluntarily put himself into a shitty position by running off on Chiyoh. If she hasn’t already found out that he’s escaped, she’ll learn soon enough and he doubts she’ll be very happy. He can’t imagine the Ripper will be either. Having him loose in his hideout didn’t seem like something he would want, but then what could Will know about what a homicidal maniac wanted?

Without his permission, his mind pulls up the memory of the Ripper tearing through the facility, snapping the necks of the guards he’d tried to protect. The sheer *lifelessness* he’d felt when his senses had dared to try and reach him. The fact that he hasn’t seen the man’s face makes him even more uneasy. What could be hidden behind that mask? His power had to come out in some terrible, physical way. Will’s eyes had clouded with each use; he couldn’t imagine in what way the monster’s skin acted as a monument to his sins.

He turns and finds an endless looking hallway, dimmer than the rooms he’d been in before. The lights aren’t flickering, though. It isn’t a lack of concentrated energy that makes it so dark, though Will can’t understand why anyone would intentionally make it so hard to see. He has to place a hand on the wall just to guide him through without bumping into a corner.

The air grows thicker the farther he goes. It clogs up his lungs, damp and unnatural, forcing Will to come to a stop. He places a hand on his chest, taking several heavy breaths, one exhale ending in a quiet *shit.* For the first time since he’s woken up, Will extends himself down the hall. He does so with caution; there’s no need to alert any empaths or telepaths that might be ahead.

There are no other psychic energies, though. There’s only a single spark he nearly sweeps past altogether. It only has a faint tinge of emotional intelligence, the kind one would find in animals; simple and usually rather sweet, a blank canvas of fleeting feelings and primal urges. But this….it holds a subtle difference that makes Will freeze.

Honing in on the spark gives him no answers. Will is only enveloped by a swirl of angry red and sickly yellow in place of real emotion. When he tries to dig further and find something more he only touches at a black void that makes his bellyache.

He takes a few steps forward. His fingers dig into the soil of the wall. As soon as he moves, an essence stirs from beyond— and not just on a psychic plane. Down the hall, something scuffles around, each heavy thud of a paw, foot, whatever it may be causing Will's unease to grow. Only a few seconds pass before a low guttural growling follows, trapped and echoing through space. The wandering, misplaced emotions suddenly ground themselves in one solid feeling: *Hunger.*

It edges closer even as Will backs away, gaining speed till he can hear it's labored panting, and then—

A flash of red passes over Will's shoulder and plops wetly into the shadows. Will jumps back from it and doesn't become any less startled when he realizes it's a rather decently sized chunk of meat. He whips around, pulling in all his senses at once. Instead of a monster, he's greeted by a polite smile. "I would suggest taking a step back."

Blindly, Will does just that. He watches with horror as a skeletal claw smothered with dead furs comes out from the shadows and drags the meat away with it. Will waits till the heavy breathing is out of earshot before asking, "What the hell was that?"

"That," the man wipes his hand off on a washcloth. Splatters of blood stand out starkly against the white sleeve of his shirt, his beige pants. "Was Randall. He isn't quite used to receiving visitors, especially not ones so close to his lunch. I hope he didn't frighten you." His smile remains. The same warmth doesn't reach his eyes. "I hope *I* didn't either. I'm not in the habit of sneaking up on others."

Will shakes his head. "You didn't. But you're alright with…that? Randall?" He asks. "He's a meta-human?"

"Something like that, yes." The towel is tucked neatly back into the man's pocket. "How did you find yourself in his quarters? Most know not to wander too far."

Will's eyes flicker between the stranger and the light at the end of the hall. "I just got lost. It's a big place."

The man looks around like he's just noticed the maze of dirt around them. "I suppose it is. You can't be expected to have made a mental map already. You've only just arrived."

Suspicion creeps openly into his features. "I'm, I haven't—"

"Don't lie about obvious things, Will."

Maybe he imagines it, but it feels as though all the heat is sucked out of the room. Goosebumps rise on his arms and the hair on the back of his neck stands on end as he recognizes that slanted accent. His hands retreat from his pockets, fingers twitching at his sides. The Ripper notices this. He chuckles. "That won't be necessary. I've no intention of starting a fight."

"And I'm just supposed to believe you?" Will snaps. "I went against your orders and now you found me snooping around your hideout. What's going to keep you from dolling out a

punishment?”

The Ripper turns and begins moving back the way he came. “As Chiyoh said, you are not a prisoner here. You may go ‘snooping’ wherever you like. Even if I had a say in the matter, I wouldn’t punish you over this small disobedience.”

Will stays put, brows pinching together. “Why not?”

“Because it tells me that you haven’t been broken in just yet.” The Ripper looks over his shoulder. “Now, come along. There’s more we have to discuss privately.”

He waits till The Ripper is several feet ahead of him before following. There’s really no other option for him; even if he’s ‘free to wander’, that doesn’t mean the Ripper won’t pester and prod at him till he does what’s wanted of him. Besides, Will would be lying if he said he wasn’t interested in seeing what the other has in store for him.

As they move back through the more populated areas, the crowd shifts around them to make way for the Ripper. Only a few dare to look at him directly, but it’s all only wary glances and peeks before they’re back to their business. Fear comes through stronger than any adoration does but that’s a comfort to Will. At least they’re not blind to his atrocities despite being saved by him.

They wind all the way back from where Will came and then further still. Instead of infirmaries and food banks, he begins to see artillery and gear being carried around, stocked in different rooms and armed in others. The Ripper actually acknowledges several of them, offering nods that are returned with a fierceness. One of these nods is directed at Chiyoh. She leans against a support beam just outside a curtained doorway, staring directly at Will. She says nothing even as they pass by her and into the room, but her frigid look tells Will everything he needs to know.

The Ripper pushes aside the heavy maroon curtains for Will and reveals a rather large and strangely decadent room. It’s only *strangely* decadent due to how much the furniture clashes with the walls and floors. A fine wooden table with clawed feet sits at the center, documents and files scattered across it. To the right of the room is a similarly made closet and a standing mirror. To the right is a bookcase, two plush armchairs, and a neatly made queen-sized bed.

The Ripper moves to the desk, sweeping some papers into a folder. “You've caused quite a stir, and not just with Randall.”

“It’s hard to keep a low profile when everyone seems to know who you are. Not that you’ve ever tried that.” Will moves to stand against the wall. “Keeping a low profile, I mean.”

A slight smile comes and goes. The folders are tucked away into the desk drawers. “I beg to differ. You and your captors knew about me for years, yet this is the first time you’ve seen my face.”

“Only because you never stayed around long enough to claim your slaughter.” Every word drips out, each one more venomous than the last. The Ripper hardly seems affected by this.

He doesn't even look up, continuing to tidy up his desk. It bothers Will more than he likes to admit. "What do you want?"

With the desk cleared save for a small map, The Ripper sits down and for all the world he just looks like a man conducting business. The casualness of it makes Wills skin crawl. "What do I want with you or what do I want in a general sense?" He asks. "Those two things are intertwined, though you think might be looking for a more specific answer."

"With me*."* Will clarifies none too nicely. "You knew my name. You asked for me, and Chiyoh told me you don't usually have individual meet and greets with the meta's you bring here." He hears a slight ruffle come from the door, as though Chiyoh herself is ready to leap into the room and defend her word.

The Ripper doesn't glance at the doorway, his gaze steady as stone and focused entirely on Will. "Just as my alias has circulated our community, so has yours. We are both infamous in our own ways—and those ways are not quite as dissimilar as you might want to believe." There's no chance for Will to argue with that even if he wanted to, the other man carrying on. "What I'd like to come from this is an agreement. An exchange. I wouldn't ask anything of you without giving in return." His eyes narrow just slightly. "Technically I have given but, from what I understand, you don't necessarily see your liberation as something that needs to be repaid."

Will snorts. "*Liberation?* You tore down a building, threatened our group, almost strangled me to death, and now you've got everyone stuck in some underground bunker asking for favors. I wouldn't call that something as righteous as *liberation."* He touches at his abused throat lightly, fingers ghosting over the ring of bruises that are there.

Even though he's spent the last twenty minutes or so at the Rippers side, it hasn't truly occurred to Will that maybe he needs to speak a little more gently. Even if he's deadly to the touch, the Ripper wouldn't have any problem covering his hands and snapping Will's arms or legs. Common sense only kicks him as the Ripper's eyes narrow more, mere slits as he considers Will. Whatever he comes to in the end is good, as all of Will's bones remain unbroken and the other's expression relaxes into amusement. "Righteous or not, you're no longer caged. Once you allow me to say my piece, I will be happy to show you one of the many ways out." He tilts his head almost playfully. "Will you allow me?"

Will reigns in the temptation to reach out his senses just to start jabbing at the Rippers psyche and nods rigidly.

"Thank you. Now, I assume Chiyoh gave you the very basics of the situation. By now, you must have come to some of your own logical conclusions to what this place is for and what I must be doing. While I'm interested on your take of all these moving parts, what I need is the knowledge you have of outside operations." He folds his hands on top of the desk. "You have been placed in a prized position within the government for most of your life. Even though certain things may have been kept from you, you still have intimate knowledge of their inner-workings. The people. The positions. That type of information is very valuable."

"Who says I'll give it to you?" Will asks. "Why not just have your telepath pluck it out of my head?"

“I’m afraid Bedelia’s abilities don’t go as far as ‘plucking’ information out. She can enter your mind, see your memories, offer hallucinations—among other things. But having the same focused recollection of said memories is something that she hasn’t yet managed to perfect. As for guaranteeing that you will give us what we need willingly….” He pauses as if weighing what kind of answer to give. “There are other ways. None of which I’d like to consider, but they exist. I can only hope that my first and most harmless option will make it possible for us to work together.”

“What’s the first option?”

The Ripper unfolds his hands. “Gaining your trust.”

The idea of trusting a man like this is so ridiculous that Will has half a mind to tell him that much, just so they can banish the idea right there and then. He doesn't, but only because he wants to stave off possible torture for a while longer. So instead he asks, “And what do I get from this deal?”

Even with his senses withdrawn, Will can’t miss the distant buzz of excitement. It’s subtle, shown more in the way he actually stands as he speaks. “I would show you the power you can truly wield. How you can control it.”

(he reacts physically to that, growing rigid and distant, his thoughts light up with hope; it flashes over his eyes, visions of warmth and skin and touch that he’s been so long deprived of...)

“You’re lying,” Will says. He doesn’t even try to reach out and confirm it.

The Ripper moves to stand beside the desk, inching closer with each passing second. “Those who imprisoned you only used you as a blunt weapon, swinging you about and pointing you blindly at anything that they perceived as an enemy. Years wasted, squandering your talents thinking you only existed to maim.” His lip twitches, apparently disgusted by whatever he knows of Will’s treatment.

He comes closer, beyond the desk and only a few feet away. Will finds himself unable to even mimic eye contact, gaze tacked on the clawed foot of the dresser (his thoughts battle over whether they’re meant to be a lion or some strange beast; it’s a very nice distraction from the rest of his spiraling sense of self). “I don’t know what that telepath picked out of me,” he says. “But it’s not what you’re making it out to be.”

“They planted a lie inside of you, Will. You allowed it let it take root and now, you haven’t been able to tell instinct from illness.” The Ripper tilts his head, trying to meet Will’s gaze. “You’ve felt it, haven’t you? Your control wavering, skidding rather than gliding.”

His eyes snap up to The Ripper’s face. There, he sees an expression not filled with kindness or pity, but *knowing.* His stomach ties in knots and a thousand things come to mind. Denying that tick is useless with a telepath around and lessening the extent of what it was wouldn’t do much better. Lashing out might lose its charm to the Ripper if he did it too often, but playing passive to all of this wasn’t something Will was willing to do. Confirming the ‘illness’, his twitching hold over his abilities is…..it’s not something he even wants to admit to himself.

The Ripper must get some sense of his conflict and is merciful enough to take a step away. “There’s still time to think about it. No decision must be made just yet.” He says, but all Will can hear is the unspoken, *but you need to make the right one.*

The possibility of being able to touch anything without it dying is one he would normally jump on. Even if he's become apathetic to this lost sense, it doesn't mean he's never wished or wanted for it. He just can't imagine working with The Ripper, more or less feeding him information to use against people he knows. Still, it's hard to take any moral high ground here when he's worked for better people and done worse things.

His own frustration starts giving him a headache. “Are we done?” Will asks. He fidgets when the other turns and shoots him an odd look. “You said you’d show me the way out once you said what you needed to say. Now you’ve done that.”

The amusement returns. “So I did.” The Ripper then moves back towards the closet, opening it and grabbing a long, charcoal coat and a beige hunting jacket. “We’ll be needing these.” The first he drapes over himself and the second he hands to Will. When he hesitates, The Ripper shakes it. “It won’t bite.”

That comment is enough for Will to snatch it from him out of spite.

He’s the first to leave the room, pausing so that the Ripper can start leading the way. Chiyoh watches them as they go, but doesn't follow. Just as before the crowd parts for him while they wind through the maze. "A side effect of your 'infamy'?" Will asks.

The Ripper's gaze slides over the rest of the room, revealing nothing. "A show of respect."

Even with the jacket on Will notices how it grows a bit colder the farther they go, chills biting through his jumpsuit. The soil becomes firmer under his feet and the dampness in the air subsides once they make their final turn.

At the end of the hall are wooden steps leading up to a small, rickety door. The Ripper stops, stepping to the side. “After you.”

Carefully, Will begins the climb up. It’s not a particularly long staircase or even very steep, but it’s better to keep his guard up when he has a murderer right behind him (well, not *quite* on his back; the Ripper actually gives him ample space, though that doesn’t mean much when he can close said space in the blink of an eye). His pace picks up as he gets to the door, Will cracking it open just to get a quick peek inside. There’s no danger, just what looks like the inside of a shed. Ice slicks parts of the floor, dead grass sticking up from the boards and wind coming in through a single broken window. Behind him, the Ripper buttons up his jacket.

Despite the chill, Will doesn’t do the same. In fact he hardly moves at all, staring at the next door in front of him. Through the rotting cracks he can see white flurries and a hint of trees peering at him from the other side. His breath catches in the air, misting up and flying away right before his eyes. He moves to the door, one step at a time. With numb fingers, he pushes it open and is greeted with a white, wide, beautiful world.

His senses snap out without command, traveling all directions and revealing life at every turn. There are no routes to map, no set paths or security— just miles upon miles of flourishing wilderness. The snow crunches under his sneakers, clumps of it soaking his socks and freezing his ankles. The trees tower above him, branches shaking and scratching against one another. He gets to his knees and thrusts his hands into it, deep enough until he can take handfuls of the limp grass beneath it. He tugs out frozen soil and crumbles it in his hand as his mind continues to spiral out further and further, fading out into the woods beyond his reach.

Emotion, simple and clean flourishes all around him, hidden in the trees and bushes, underground and above. Buried beneath the snow is Spring, waiting patiently to greet him.

It's the fifth time he's ever been outside. It's the only time it's ever felt real.

He cranes his neck to look straight up at the sky. It’s grey and cloudy. The wind is picking up, tousling his hair around his face and whipping snowflakes harshly against his cheeks. It’s what would be considered a miserable day. And it’s *beautiful.*

A strangled laugh forces its way out of him. It wracks his body, burns his throat and tugs at his vocal cords, but pain can't force it away. From the safety of the shed, he can feel curiosity growing and shaping into something else entirely. He’s unable to focus on it, far too shaken with his joy which rings out into the empty woods, broken and terrible, carried and consumed by the storm.

Chapter End Notes

If any of you want to get comfortable with Hannibal being a relatively decent person, here's a tip:

Don't.

(kudos and comments are always welcomed and appreciated!)

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

> “Why not the- this one?” Peter asks from below. He holds up the other choice, a dull red sweater that looks like it would be at least a size too big for his frame.
>
> Will shrugs. “It just looks better.”
>
> Peter lets out a displeased hum, asking again, “But why?”
>
> Will looks over again. There’s nothing strikingly different about either of the sweaters. Both would probably be too big for Peter, both are about the same condition, (at least slightly used) and there are no patterns to make either more appealing. They’re just sweaters.
>
> “It’s blue,” Will says.

Chapter Notes

> How many times am I allowed to apologize for insanely slow updates?

He has a cough for the next few days. Thankfully, Peter’s perfectly happy playing nurse. After he’d dragged himself back inside, the Ripper (*Hannibal,* he’d insisted, *My name is Hannibal)* had shown him the back routes to where the others had been placed. It’d only taken a few minutes for him to find Peter in the rows of cots, and it’d taken less than that for Peter to dive into the story of what had gone on while Will had been away. Stolen military trucks had moved them from the Burrow to the station, herded them through for an informal registration before leaving them to their own devices.

He doesn’t hear much more than that, all of it falling away as he thinks back to the snow, the chill, chasing the feeling of being alive.

When he comes down from that high and Peter asks him what happened, Will doesn’t answer. When he specifically asks about the Ripper, Will shuts the conversation down before it can even begin. He’s going to have a few days without the monster stepping directly into his life again and he wants to keep it that way.

Keeping that wish is as hard as expected; everywhere he turns people are whispering about the Ripper, if they’ve seen him passing through the halls or heading outside, what they think

of him from the few glimpses they've gotten.

The one person he'd expected to be most excited about this turn of events is nowhere to be seen. "Where did Matthew go?" Will had asked. Peter had only shrugged—apparently, he hadn't seen him since they'd loaded onto the trucks. While he's relieved that he won't have to deal with any true fanaticism, worry still gnaws at him. It's one thing for it to be contained here, and another it to be running loose around the station. By now, he's decided by now that there's no use in worrying over someone he can't find. He finds himself concerned by smaller things, though, like—

"Wuh- Which one you think?" Peter holds up two sweaters. Several trunks are lined up against the wall, all with different tags. *Children, Women, Men; Small, Medium, Large.*

Will peers out from the top bunk, a magazine spread out on his lap. Movement jostles his chest enough to bring on a cough. "Blue."

Peter closes his eyes and placing them both down on the ground to look them over. Will goes back to his reading. It's not anything special or even particularly interesting; there are two pages entirely dedicated to deciding who wore which dress the best to some event Will's never heard of, nit-picking over the tiniest details of how flattering it looks on one and how devastating the other is in comparison. It's mind-numbing, but it's the sort of thing Will hadn't been allowed back with the M.C.P (not that he'd ever specifically asked for them, but considering they never offered, he was sure there'd been some restriction in place; there always were).

"Why not the- this one?" Peter asks from below. He holds up the other choice, a dull red sweater that looks like it would be at least a size too big for his frame.

Will shrugs. "It just looks better."

Peter lets out a displeased hum, asking again, "But *why?"*

Will looks over again. There's nothing strikingly different about either of the sweaters. Both would probably be too big for Peter, both are about the same condition, (at least slightly used) and there are no patterns to make either more appealing. They're just sweaters.

"It's blue," Will says.

Peter gives him an odd look at that, confusion wriggling its way around their bunk. The words in front of him start to mean even less, becoming intelligible little squiggles on a glossy page. Will's eyes still roam over them, pretending to understand what they mean so that he can avoid Peter's stare. *Blue is safe,* is the only reason he can come up with when he really tries to think about it. Blue is normal. Familiar. *Safe.*

His fingers crease up the edges of the magazine. Peter huffs but doesn't push the subject. After twenty minutes, he decides red is the way to go.

In quiet moments he thinks about the Rippers offer. He knows that he can't keep putting it off forever; at some point, the Ripper is going to come back and Will doubts that he'd be willing to give any more time to think things over. Still, he lets the metaphorical time slowly tick away, second by second, going over all his options. It's hard to come to a decision when his thoughts go two very different ways on the matter.

On one hand, a twisted form of justice might come from handing over information. He's never been blind to how awful their practices really are. The Ripper and his minions wouldn't be doing anything that the M.C.P hadn't already done. Yes, the Ripper had technically kidnapped people, but they all appeared to have stayed willingly. Even those that fought alongside him did so more out of loyalty and reverence rather than fear— the same couldn't be said for those being handled by the M.C.P.

On the other hand, the Ripper won't hold back from giving those in charge their due punishment. When he thinks of handing over the information, he conjures up the image of Jack's mutilated body, guts spilling out from his belly and limbs torn from his body. When he thinks the same of happening to Alana, his throat tightens up and it becomes just a little harder to breathe.

He doesn't owe them anything. They'd done terrible things to him and had asked terrible things of him; they'd stolen him from the world and bloodied his hands. Maybe it hadn't been done maliciously, but it had still been done.

That doesn't mean he wants to see them all die, though.

(Chilton excluded, of course)

Will huffs, turning onto his side and pressing the side of his face into the pillow. He thinks of a lazy stream, cool water running over his eye and drowns in all of his considerations.

He hasn't had any real rest since he's gotten to the station. Whenever he starts to drift into a deeper sleep, a phantom feeling of invasion creeps around his skull. It pokes and prods, trying to find the cracks it had once so easily seeped through.

Will always jerks up in bed, pushing out his walls a little further each time. Every time he hits something, it retreats before he can chase it back to its source.

Will experiences many new things living in the station. He learns how little he likes sharing his space with other people. Sharing his quarters with Peter had been one thing—they'd gotten along well, but Will had still enjoyed the way they both knew to give each other room to breathe. There's none of that here; the beds are cramped against one another, leaving only small aisles to move through the maze of bunks. The people don't help much, bumping into one another and shouting across the room at times.

The next experience is something worse. Will learns what it's like to go hungry.

He's not *starving.* His body has just become used to scheduled meals and it cries out in the odd hours. By the time they're allowed to go get rations from storage, his stomach has cramped up terribly. "Will Graham," he says, unable to stifle the edge in his voice.

The woman on duty is always the same and always gives him the same look. Her hands shake as she ticks off his name and hands him his food. It's a packaged ham sandwich and canned peas and carrots. She places both items on the table, delicately pushing them his way. The only time that she looks at him during this exchange is when he leaves, her curious looks burning holes into his back.

Everywhere he turns, there's somebody trying to hide their stares. The Ripper had put him into the spotlight on that first day whether he intended to or not, leaving Will open to the scrutiny of everyone in the station. He ignores it to the best of his ability, but he doesn't do himself any favors—his jumpsuit sticks out like a sore thumb amongst the others.

He keeps his clothes neat and tidy, putting it in to wash when communal laundry days come around. It always comes back with a different smell. Instead of the usual lavender, it's faint citrus or, on worse days, a damp must. Sometimes when he presses his hands into the shallow pockets, there's a piece of lint. Another time, there's a penny. He gives it to Peter.

Peter turns his eyes up to the ceiling of the sad excuse of a mess hall and rubs his fingers over the impression of Lincoln's face. "Yuh-you can still ask for, uh, new stuff. Sure they wouldn't muh-mind it, y'know." When Will doesn't respond, too busy picking fluff out of his pockets and rubbing at his leaking nose, Peter huffs. He sets the penny down on the table next to his can of pinto beans. "'Specially not since you know H-Hannibal."

Any and all efforts to clean his jumpsuit come to a screeching halt. He looks up, brows furrowed and mouth twisted downwards. *"Hannibal?"*

Peter nods, seeing nothing wrong with the word (because it's not a name; it can't be, not when names are supposed to belong to people, not when names carry the weight of intimacy). Will leans forward. "You're calling him Hannibal?"

"That's wuh-what everybody calls him. 'S not bad."

Confusion and slight annoyance slides across the table, ripped by the jagged edges of his frustration. Will is tempted to snap shut the small bubble of sensory awareness that he's allowed to exist around Peter, but refrains. Peter doesn't mean any harm; he never does. The perplexed nature of his emotions reminds Will of that much. So he just sighs, grabbing another tissue and blowing his nose.

Peter dejectedly nibbles at his beans, lighting up a little when Will pushes his sandwich across the table.

Despite his doubts, people are allowed to come and go as they please. There's a curfew, yes, but there's no one guarding the door to the outside and no one that he has to inform on his whereabouts. On one hand, the lack of scheduling makes his skin crawl. On the other, it's a little relieving that Hannibal is at least attempting to make it look like he's giving him space.

Most of the time he goes out with Peter. The other man comes alive in the wilderness; he's not so much interested in the snow as he is in the creatures that scurry around the forest floor. Squirrels and rabbits cautiously come out from their nests to greet him as they wander, Peter whispering and cooing nonsense words to them as he crouches in the snow.

"Once the snuh-snow melts, there'll be babies." He says, rubbing his fingers gently over a rabbit's head. Another one hops out of its hole, flopping onto its side right next to Peter.

Will hums from a distance. He digs gloved fingers into the snow, touching strands of dead grass beneath. He takes his peace from Peter and pretends he can feel fur.

There's no TV or computer's down in the station, but Will has some guesses on what kind of state the M.C.P is in. The public probably still doesn't have a clue as to what happened—an infiltration on this level likely wouldn't be privy to anyone who's not involved in the department's current affairs. In his mind, Will shapes Alana's panic; it's wild and unstable, spiking up and down and never once reaching equilibrium.

Jack's must be quieter— angrier. Not only has he lost the prize piece in his game, but the movement he'd asked to happen had backfired on him. The two of them had fought at some point. They might still be fighting. They also might be raiding any suspected spot, every dark corner, even the slightest boom in meta-human activity.

He shapes desperation, molds it in his hands. He adds a hint of kindness and care to their motivations as he imagines them—but that's only for Will to know (and only for him to refuse to analyze).

Laundry is done somewhere outside the confines of the station. There's a town somewhere in the outskirts of the forest, small enough that it won't cause trouble but big enough that they don't get too suspicious about strangers passing through the laundromat. Will only asked about it because he wasn't sure if he liked the thought of his clothes being washed in a river.

It's always the same girl that delivers his jumpsuit back to him. She lays it out on his bed, the same tired blue as before. Will slides it on over his boxers and wife-beater, checks for clumps of lint.

"The button," Will notes. He scratches at his breast pocket, fingers playing with the loose threads. "It's missing."

The girl is clearly unable to see the severity of this loss. She goes off to continue her deliveries, leaving his thoughts to fester.

When he reunites with Matthew, it's by accident. He doesn't mean to meet anyone—Will is going around the station, mapping out the tunnels and entrances in his head. He's not sure how long he'll be staying here, or when the station will be raided. It's better to take the time to get an understanding of where any and all exits are before everything falls through.

He's mapped it out like this: the entrance to the woods leads down into the Main Hub, which is used less as a gathering place and more as breathing room from the interconnecting, tight corridors that make up the maze of the station. The corridors to the left are, in order: the infirmary, the food bank, and extra storage. To the right, there are the halls that lead down to several sleeping quarters, the artillery room, and the merging forbidden tunnel of Randall.

There are other, smaller rooms around where people higher up in the Ripper's hierarchy stay. Bedelia and Chiyoh have their own quarters close to the main pocket of luxury. Will doesn't bother prowling around there; he has no desire to see the telepathic minion. Chiyoh doesn't bother him all that much, but on the few rare times he's seen her, she insists that the Ripper needs his answer soon.

He's passing through the artillery room, slipping through the lazy flood of people when it happens—a call of *"Will!"* A hand claps his shoulder, making him jerk to a stop.

Will snaps around to face the assaulter only to be met with a grinning Matthew. He's dressed in jeans and a faded red shirt. His smile looks like it hurts him, though there's no reason to guess why. His jaw is bruised, a splotchy yellow-purple color.

(after this meeting, Will goes to bed and replays hitting Matthew, wonders what the bruise looked like when it was fresh; what will follow are unkind thoughts that will have him stuffing his face into his pillow in an attempt to suffocate them)

"Will," Matthew says again, quieter but no less excited. "It's good to see you. I asked around about you—it's a small space, but it's still hard to find the same faces when you want to." He cocks his head. "How have you been holding up?"

"I'm….fine." He'd been more *fine* before he'd met Matthew, but there isn't much he can do about that now. "I haven't seen you in any of the quarters at night."

Confidence bounces off of Matthew at that moment, his whole posture changing with the shifting mood. "Don't sleep in them. I'm on the outside most of the time—it's nicer spending the night out there than cramped in here."

Will frowns. He thinks of the sleeping bags, stolen goods, and rowdy meta-humans. "They let you do that?"

"Me, yeah. But not everyone." Matthew looks around the room, ushering Will to the side. Others come into the room unmarked boxes, both plastic and wood (holding bullets and guns in Lock N' Lock's doesn't seem like the smartest thing, but it's not like they have unlimited options for storage. "I'm a scout now. I make trips with other stations, bring supplies in and

out. They gave me a car. A *car."* He breathes a soft laugh. "I can't even remember the last time I drove a car."

Matthew pauses, as if he's waiting for Will to say something similar. Embarrassment flashes quickly and he moves on, likely remembering that Will, despite being over thirty, has never even been behind a wheel in his life. "I do rounds. It's safer for me than anybody else, seeing as I'm my own escape route." He flashes another smile.

"And they placed you here after seeing your power?" He asks, all while putting up a slight guard against the oozing smugness (not because it feels bad on his end, but because he can't stand the knowledge that the blood on Matthew's hands is not only being ignored, but rewarded).

Matthew shakes his head. "I volunteered." He leans in an inch, close enough that Will can see that same, excited and sadistic little spark in his eye. "I had an audience with the Ripper. He *personally* gave me my role here."

And he continues talking, going over the details of the meeting, how he'd performed, how impressed the Ripper had been. Will can't even try and pretend to listen, staring off at other workers as they take stock of different boxes, inspecting barrels and springs and spare parts.

There are other stations out there. He's had a feeling there would be. But now, he thinks about the collection of weapons they might have over there. How many people they have underground. How many do they expect will use them? How many bodies do they have to spare in a fight?

Will leaves, unsure of whether he's interrupted Matthew's report or not.

He picks at his missing button. Snow falls softly on the ground, guided by the wind rather than harassed by it. "They're going to ask you to kill people." He says. "Not now, but soon."

Peter blinks. He's crouched to the ground with a little bird perched on his thumb, eagerly going at the grain he has pooled in his hand. "Then I'd suh-say no."

A laugh threatens to escape him, because it's never that simple and it never will be. "They'd make you. They'd put you in a position where you can't refuse." Will stares down at his boots, speckled in white. His vision flashes just as he blinks, spreading red dots around the edges. "We should leave."

Now, Will has never known Peter to get angry. He's felt him annoyed, frustrated, and maybe even agitated, but nothing quite like *anger.* What he feels now is the closest it's ever been— it's why he refuses to look up at all, only hearing the crunch of snow as Peter stands. "And guh-go where?" Peter snips. "This is—it's good, here. People are nice, 'n I've got— there's the animals. They're here. And *I'm* here too."

And the Ripper's here, and Bedelia, and Matthew— "And when it's not good?"

“It *is* good.” Peter stamps a foot into the ground. “Just….stop trynna mah-make it….not.”

A pause. Peter takes a breath. *“Please.”*

He’s not unreasonable.

He knows that. He knows it for a *fact.* Will is not unreasonable to distrust a man who eats human flesh, who kills dozens at a time without thought, who collects vulnerable people that he can twist to do his bidding. Still, he can’t help but *feel* unreasonable when everyone else seems to tell him he is.

None of them do it verbally besides Peter. Though the subject’s been dropped for the sake of their friendship, he still feels the other man bristle once they go back inside, carrying the same anger with him into the night right until he falls asleep. But everyone else—he can sense it. The peace is there, stagnant and dull for now, but there’s complacency. They do what they’re told when they’re told to. There’s the odd complaint of a creaky bed or stale food, but little else.

He knows they’re not stupid. He knows that they’re scared—he’d assumed they were just scared of leaving because of the Ripper and what he might do. Now, it’s easier to understand that they don’t fear the consequences, but the unknown that comes *with* leaving.

Where *would* they go? Those that have families can’t return to them without putting loved ones at risk. Those that don’t and have visible mutations don’t have many options, and the few that exist involve squatting in overcrowded cities or trying to cross the border (a futile attempt without the resources provided by these stations). With the Ripper, they’re given food and shelter. The safety here is temporary, but outside? It’s nonexistent.

Peter’s anger fizzles out quickly enough, and the matter is forgotten between them.

He steps out into the snow without Peter. The other isn’t really upset with him anymore, but he’s avoidant, straying away from Will. It’s a petty move, but Will doesn’t press at the issue to try and agitate or resolve it. He’s not sure what he can do to make up for it, and he’s not about to admit that he’s wrong about something when he’s not.

The wind is harsher today. It bites at him, whips his hair in infrequent but vicious gusts. He wraps his coat tighter around himself, drowning in his scarf and hat, but he doesn’t turn back. Instead, he leans against a tree and looks out at the wintry landscape around. His senses expand, and he feels the drowsy rabbit, the mindless bird. Peter had described their emotions in more complexity than Will could imagine them to have; the things they feared, the things that made them happy, the things that made them sad.

Will lifts his head and whistles. Somewhere, a bird chirps back, and he looks up to the branches above. The note is different. He offers another, but there’s no response. The song

ends there—not only that, but he sees any birds perched up in the trees rise up and dart out of sight.

A quiet crunch of snow behind him. “Chiyoh tells me you spend much of your time out here. I can understand why,” The Ripper lets out a soft sigh. “Had you ever seen the world like this, before you came here?”

“You’re having her spy on me?” Will stuffs his hands into his pockets, tense.

“Spying— that’s a childish way to put it.” The Ripper says. “I never asked her to observe you. She is just….protective, I suppose.”

Will glances over his shoulder. “And Bedelia?”

The Ripper is dressed in a grey sweater, wrapped in a coat and scarf, the same as Will. “Have you felt her prying?”

“I felt someone trying to lock-pick my mental door instead of knocking. It’s not every night, but give her my message?” Will turns, only facing him halfway. It’s not very smart to have his back to a predator. *“Stay the hell away from me.”*

He looks away, then, eyes lazily scanning over the horizon. “Do you have a message for me as well?”

The question is simple, but there’s something beneath it all. It’s not…impatience, per se. The Ripper seems to have an infinite amount of that. It’s not irritation at the lack of Will’s answer either. But it’s deep, and dark, and foreboding enough that Will knows better than to offer any biting remarks. He looks to the middle of the Ripper’s chest, tracing the woven patterns of his sweater. The other man's stare burns holes in his forehead. “A few more days, then.” And off the Ripper goes, back down to his dirt kingdom.

(that night, Will slips out of bed with a backpack. He goes to the trunk of clothes that sits idly by the wall, packing away two pairs of pants and two shirts, a flannel, a jacket.

He looks back to his bunk, squinting through the dark. Peter remains in bed, curled on his side, covered by a thick blanket and a thin pillow.

The stag huffs. Stamps a hoof against the solid, cold ground. Stares at him, eyes shining, too bright to meet.

He stays)

The jumpsuit is left neatly folded under his pillow, hidden but still there. Will tugs on the flannel over his shirt, buttoning it up. The pants don't fit quite right, a little loose around the waist, but his options are scarce since he waited this long to look.

(he hadn't put on the things he'd packed; they'd all been thrown back into the trunk, lost in a sea of cloth. They feel too much like evidence of his would-have-been abandonment for him to tout them around on his back)

Peter smiles at him, twitchy and excited. "Looks good." He nods, plopping down on the edge of the bed. He doesn't ask him to, but Will bends down to help him tie the laces of his right boot. "Feel good?"

"It's warmer," he hums.

When the knot's finished, Peter stands and looks Will over fully again. He reaches out blindly and pokes at a shiny button. "Blue is— blue's nuh-nice."

He sleeps on it again. When he tries to recall Alana and Jack's faces, though they're blurrier than they ever have been before. It's not that he can't remember them, but more that he can't clearly see every detail. Had Alana's eyes been green? Blue? Somewhere in between? How much gray had crept into Jack's hair?

It's all very striking to him, considering any time he calls up the people he's killed, he's able to see them all as if they'd just been right in front of him.

This time, looking at all his exhausted options, Will's able to lift his head above the water.

Maybe it's shame that brings him to the Ripper's quarters in the middle of the night. He's not the only one awake, and he knows—Chiyoh's somewhere nearby, watching in anticipation. At the edge of his vision, he catches the glint of a blade, but that doesn't stop him. There's no room for thinking or hesitation now.

He slides past the curtain without any care to announce himself. The Ripper himself doesn't appear particularly perturbed by the intrusion, though; he's settled at his desk, two candles lit to cast warm, hellish shadows across his face. He looks up, setting his pen down delicately. "Will?"

He thinks of Alana. Of Jack. Of everything.

Will finds Hannibal's amber gaze. Excitement blooms and bursts as he speaks. "Where do we start?"

He's done worse things to survive.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In his head, his walls look rather neat. He’s not so heavily fortified; they’re red brick and several feet higher than him, sturdy and capable. Will has made every inch of it from scratch, no teacher needed, no guidance provided. It’s gotten him through the most overwhelming years of his life.

And yet, when he looks up beyond the brick and sees Bedelia’s mind coiling at the edges, peeking over like wild ivy, he knows they’re not enough.

Chapter Notes

Quarantine is a great time to get things done, don't you agree?

(I'm wishing you all the best, please stay home and stay healthy)

The Ripper doesn’t move. Physically, he gives away nothing, but his emotions—they’re sweeping the room, strange and tainted, lapping at Will’s walls. He doesn’t push back at them, but he hardly invites them in. This calls for more than indifference; he has to stand with conviction (even if he’s still unsure whether or not he’s made the right choice). The Ripper makes to speak, but Will’s words bubble forwards before he can breathe a word into the room. “You show me how to control this first, and then I’ll help you.”

These aren’t the terms he’d been given. They’re both perfectly aware of this much. Will stares ahead at the Ripper’s hand, tracing the shadows of his knuckles. The silence allows for his hesitations to incubate, growing painfully. He’s not just condemning himself. He’s dragging Alana and Jack with him— any hope for Peter escaping with him is dashed away now. He’s willingly walking straight into Hell.

The Ripper lets out a soft breath. It could be a sigh—it might be. No annoyance seeps through. “If that’s how you’d like this to go,” he says, even and calm. His fingers curl back around his pen. “We can begin in two days.”

“Not tomorrow. Right now.”

The Ripper…stops. Pauses. Calculates. The pressure in the rooms shifts, uneven and unforgiving. “I don’t think you’re in a position to be making demands.”

And Will knows he shouldn't press this. He *shouldn't.* The Ripper hasn't shown him violence yet, but that doesn't mean he won't. This…it requires tact. Will steels himself. "You were right with what you said before. About illness- instinct." It hurts him to admit it, the words coming out strained. The Ripper still listens with rapt attention. "There's something…..wrong. I don't know what it is, but I *do* know it's smarter to start fixing it before it gets worse." He pauses. "Before something happens."

"Is that a threat?" The Ripper asks. It's not an accusation—in fact, it's asked rather softly.

Will snorts. "Why would I threaten *you,* of all people? What could I gain from being that stupid? No," he shakes his head. "It's a truth. You say you know something about this, about me—you should know it's not exactly in the most stable of states."

He moves forward, then. Closer to the desk, close enough that he can reach out and touch the edge with his fingertips. He does so, pressing hard so he can feel the carved indent through his gloves. "You want something from me. I want something from you. The faster I can get my end of the deal, the faster we can get to yours." He looks to the heavy curve of the Ripper's lip. "Even Steven."

Whatever it is about his approach, his words or demeanor or pressing feelers—it's enough for the other to ease. The Ripper stands calmly, slowly. Will takes a step back from the desk as he does so; not out of fear, but simply to give the other space (or, at least that's how he wants it to appear). He picks up the maroon robe that's draped over the back of his chair and shrugging it on. "I wanted to give you time to adjust to what's to come, but if you believe you are ready—"

"I am." Will says firmly.

A smile curls on his lips, and shrugs. "As you wish," he says, far too amused. His robe sweeps about his legs in a dramatic fashion as he walks, rounding Will, towards the door. "If you're so eager, then let's start."

He doesn't question why they're leaving; trying to make sense of anything that's about to happen is useless, and will probably make him second guess what he's just done. Will needs to keep moving, needs to keep his mind numb, and all of this will go by quicker.

Chiyoh is no longer waiting outside, gone in the darkness, and out of his reach. The rest of the station around them sleeps, undisturbed by either of them. The Ripper walks with a lightness he shouldn't possess—if Will wasn't looking right at him, he would have thought the man was just floating inches above the ground. But no, he walks on his own two feet—he just has a way of being terribly, unnervingly silent.

Will expects them to head down the path leading outside. While it's not exactly as covert as staying down below in the station, risking the possibility of whatever it is that he's holding back, being accidentally tested on everyone here isn't exactly the smartest course of action. He almost keeps walking down that path even as the Ripper halts in the hallway, turning towards one of the makeshift doors along the wall. Will stutters to a stop, frowning—and then scowls once he realizes exactly whose door it is that they've stopped at.

“This is why I wanted to give you some time.” The Ripper says with a sigh.

Will bristles. “You didn’t say anything about *her* being involved.”

“As I remember,” he moves to the door, knocking gently. “You didn’t allow me much time to explain when I first proposed a deal.”

“What is she even going to do for me?” He spits. The Ripper steps back from the door, apparently unaffected by his bubbling anger. “She’s a telepath, not an empath—and apparently a shitty one, considering she can’t just take what she wants from my mind—”

The door opens slowly, squeaking on the hinges that are dug into the dirt wall. A tired and unamused Bedelia is revealed, her hair in a loose ponytail over her shoulder, a white, silky robe wrapped around her form. She doesn’t even bother looking Will’s way, but he feels her presence all the same. It sneaks out from her, a wisp if nothing else, poking gently at Will’s built defenses. There’s no threat of intrusion, but he pushes back at them nonetheless. If she feels it, she doesn’t show or say. “Something I can help you with?”

Anger coils in his stomach, ready to spring and snap right at her. Will can’t stand to play games—there’s no surprise that comes with their visit, no curiosity. She’s been expecting this. *“You know.”*

She turns, blinking at him slowly. “Know what?” And he feels it again—pressure at all sides that tell him she’s there, pressing at his buttons. Bedelia blinks again, brows raising. “That you need my help? Then, yes, I know.”

Will snorts at that because *help* is the very last thing he needs from her. He might as well track Katherine down and ask for her *help* before he goes seeking it out from Bedelia. He looks to the Ripper in disgust and disbelief. “You can’t be serious. You can’t expect me to—”

“I do.”

The hall grows cold. Nerves run from Bedelia’s door and right into Will, creating a twitchy cocktail inside of him. He tenses and looks to his feet, suddenly unsure of himself. There’s a finality in the other's tone that he can’t escape…and it scares him.

(and, yes, Will’s been scared before. He’s not so apathetic that he can’t feel fear. He was afraid at the attack on the Burrow, when he had nightmares, when they’d first asked him to kill. Fear of punishment had led him down the path of acceptance since the very beginning)

The silence passes as Will’s wordless submission is given. Bedelia opens her door fully. “Would you like to come in?”

The Ripper offers quiet thanks and heads in before Will. It feels like a testament to his own power that he doesn’t even bother to carrel Will into the room—Will doesn’t dare try to do anything less than expected, shuffling in along behind him. Inside, he sees that her quarters are similar to that of the Rippers. While certainly not as big, the luxury is definitely there; the bed is large, decorated with a fine duvet and downy pillows. Two armchairs sit around a small coffee table, which has a china tea set splayed across it. Bedelia goes towards the

vanity that sits opposite to the bed, plucking up a candle. “Have you ever had contact with a telepathic meta-human? One who didn’t have their powers cut off from them?”

Will shuffles uncomfortably in his spot, inching closer to the wall. The Ripper stands steadily beside him, a forceful reminder that he should watch his words. He glares at Bedelia instead, hoping that she can feel his loathing from across the room. “No.” The words slip out from between gritted teeth.

“So,” Bedelia moves to the armchairs, carefully placing the china set over at her bed. “You’ve never had serious mental training. I’d guessed that much— your defenses are there, but there’s very little structure. I doubt any of the people who worked with you thought to check on that. Everything with them appears far more physically acclimated.” Once the coffee table’s cleared, she places the candle down and lights it. She reclines back in one, looks to Will, and gestures to the other.

Despite his better judgment, Will goes and sits. He tries to keep an eye both of Bedelia and the Ripper, whose form he can see prowling the edges of the room. “They tested me beyond the physical.” He says. There’d been plenty of brain scans and neural analyses during his time with the M.C.P.

Bedelia raises a brow. “But they didn’t understand what it was they were trying to do. If they had, you wouldn’t be in this state.”

“And what, exactly, is *this state?* The one you put me in since you started toying with me, my abilities? Because I’ve been hearing a lot about *this state* from both of you.”

Again, Bedelia chooses to ignore his bitterness. She folds one leg over the other, her face unreadable—and for the most part, her emotions remain in check, fluctuating neither here nor there, even as she speaks. “If you think I’m the one who caused your stability to sink, then you truly have no idea what it is you’re harboring inside you.”

Will can’t help but lean forwards in his chair, hackles raised. “So it’s just a coincidence it all went to shit as soon as you sank your claws into me?”

“If you leave your door and windows unlocked, it’s inevitable someone is going to come in uninvited,” Bedelia speaks in soft, low tones. “I saw an opportunity, and I took it. And now— here we are.” Even though she gestures around, her gaze flicks behind Will to the Ripper. After all, she probably isn’t the mastermind behind all this. She’s just the person who put all the pieces where they needed to be.

He sneers. “Maybe my defenses aren’t as structured as you like, but—”

“Structured?” Bedelia echoes, a perfectly sculpted brow raising. “It’s a mess. You have your walls, but all they’ve done is keep your flood of ghosts in rather than keep anyone out. You’ve been pushing against me this entire time, and while I’ve certainly felt it, there’s nothing that’s really stopping me from breaking through besides courtesy.” She shifts her legs again, gaze unwavering as she properly gains the high ground of this conversation.

It’s a terrible revelation to have. He remembers how easily the woman had torn through him upon their first real meeting, how he’d been unable to stop that invasion. Every part of Will howls for him to go on the attack again—she’s insulting him and his ability to fend for himself. But he refrains, not just because of the Ripper, but because she’s telling the truth. His jaw clenches. “Then show me."

Bedelia pauses, looks back to the Ripper again. She’s saying something that Will isn’t privy to, whether asking for permission or perhaps even cautioning against all this. It’s impossible for him to pry especially when, apparently, the woman’s so fucking aware of *everything.*

Their conversation ends, Bedelia bringing her attention back down to Will. She moves to sit at the very edge of her seat and extends both her hands forwards, palm up. When Will visibly leans away, she sighs. “We don’t have to touch. Just have your hands hover over mine.” She pauses. Her emotions waver for a moment. “Gloves on.”

(ah, right. How could Will forget that little reasonable shiver? *Fear)*

Slowly, Will does as she wills. He leans forward, placing his hands over hers— with a few good inches between, of course (for his own sake rather than Bedelia’s, of course). Instead of the telepaths palms, he focuses on the creases in his gloves, the way the light flickers around them. It’s better to distract himself, especially when he can feel Bedelia prowling around his senses, cornering him into his own mind.

“You’ll have to be open with me. We need to untangle your memories.” She says. “It’s the first step of many. You haven’t only been taking other's consciousness and lives—you’ve been taking their psychic energy.”

“But they weren’t all telepaths.”

Bedelia shakes her head. “If only people like us had psychic energy, then we’d only be able to read each other. It exists everywhere, can be generated by anyone. The difference between them and us is that we can do something with it. I can read it, manipulate it in some senses. You can absorb it, but you need to learn to control it—”

“Perhaps,” The Ripper breathes out the word from the dark, startling them both. “You’ll even be able to release it into the world at your will, beyond just physical touch.”

The air grows tense around him, the same unease manages to escape Bedelia’s cracks. The edge of her mouth twitches downwards. *“Perhaps.”* She says, voice tight. “But that’s some time away. Trying to pour out all the energy you’ve stored without taking proper measures to help you contain it would be playing with Pandora’s Box. As I said, we need to start small.”

Bedelia looks at Will as she speaks, but he has a feeling that the words aren’t for him. She’s quick to move on, though, attention returning to their hands. The energy around them shifts again, easing and continuing to push. Will feels a distinct pressure at the very base of his skull. “How long is this going to take?”

“It depends. How much longer will it take you to properly let me in?”

The urge to snap back at that is terribly strong— strong enough that Bedelia seems to hear everything nasty thing that's on the edge of his tongue, going by the look she gives him. Still, he knows she's right and he knows that this *is* what he just signed up for, unknowingly or not. It's not like he can fix this problem on his own either, and nobody is providing him with any other options. The most he can do for himself to let this happen as quickly as possible. So, he closes his eyes and thinks.

In his head, his walls look rather neat. He's not so heavily fortified; they're red brick and several feet higher than him, sturdy and capable. Will has made every inch of it from scratch, no teacher needed, no guidance provided. It's gotten him through the most overwhelming years of his life.

And yet, when he looks up beyond the brick and sees Bedelia's mind coiling at the edges, peeking over like wild ivy, he knows they're not enough.

With great hesitation, he steps forwards. He lays a hand flat on the wall, curling his fingers around rough plaster, and lets it all fall down—

Will feels her in an instant. There's hardly any time to resist it; Bedelia's flooding through his system, filling every nook and cranny, wedging herself in every empty space. His body jerks instinctively against it, blinded and choked by the intrusion (and he's only kept in place by a pair of hands on his shoulders that he can't quite feel, far too overwhelmed in his mental space by pay any mind to the physical).

Chronologically, she says somewhere in the recesses of his psyche. *It's the best way to start. First, then.* And the first:

(he's never felt like fear like this—clawing, aching, and unfiltered. He's crippled by it for a moment, strangled in the next as he tries to close in on the woman in front of him. A restraint is slapped over her forehead, others wrapped around her wrists and ankles, locking the body in place. She can't move but her eyes are wild, *fixated on him and crying*

*and he closes in, slowly, apologies spilling out and he touches her and he's sorrysorry**sorry**)*

And the third:

(it's not easier but he can do it quicker, move through the motions now that he can bottle all the shit that slips over the edge. Still, he can't help but twitch when the sobs come through, the pleading starts, and there's no comfort he can try to give)

And the twenty-fourth:

(it's a routine now, a sick routine. There's no way to blur any of the experience; they don't roll into each other as routines should. Each is vivid. They play in the back of his mind, each touch, each flash of a life there and now gone. Will is allowed to watch them take this one out, fitting a stiff body into a loose bag, wheeling him out and away

He's trying to keep track of them because the names are there but the numbers feel funny)

And the sixty-seventh:

(the man spits on him, ***spits*** *on him, coughs it up and lets it fly right onto Will's cheek, and he isn't so sorry anymore, not really, whips a hand out and feels the spark of an awful* ***something*** *that comes as he takes)*

A snapshot of each, just thumbing through the very worst moments of his life. His skull feels like it's pulsating, like his mind is ready to leak through the fractures. Faces pass quickly, lives that he's snuffed, falling from him like scales—

And the last,

Finally the last:

(and he's in the kitchen, smelling new spring and copper; fear and pain and death running up and down his spine and it's howling-scratching

"Will?"

Will stares himself down, a reflection he fails to recognize but knows all too well, too fucking well

"I think you need to—"

and he's reaching across the way in some sick attempt to patch the pieces together, to destroy the spider-silk threads that connect them,

"—*No,* we can—"

watches, because he can. Because he should

Because he has to.

"Bring him back up, something isn't—"

And he sees,

blood splatter,

dribble

from his

fingertips,

And he sees,

The worst parts of himself

violent and

oozing

"Will. *Will!*"

And

he

sees,

—the mirror of Bedelia's vanity shattering into a thousand different pieces across the room. She jolts back from Will, bringing her hands up to shield herself. Will only moves because he's jerked out of his own mind and back into the world.

He dazedly looks down at the glinting fragments that lay at his feet. Bedelia does the same, panic spiking as she shakily moves to stand, placing a steadying hand on the back of her chair. She backs away from it all with a tight expression (which he can't read, he can't sense; Bedelia's blocked him from everything, shut her windows and firmly locked all her doors so he can't even get another peek). "I think," she says, a tremble on the edge of her voice. She wraps her robe tighter around herself. "That's enough for tonight."

From the corner of his eye, Will sees the Ripper step forwards. Glass crunches underneath his boot. "We know he can manifest now. Perhaps if we went again…"

Bedelia grows cold. "I said it was enough."

While the Ripper's been insistent, he doesn't seem foolish. He'd trusted Bedelia with the responsibility of 'training' Will for a reason. Here, at least, she seems to have the last say. The Ripper merely lets out a quiet sigh and retreats back to Will, who's still stuck in his seat

— even his hands are still outstretched, fingers twitching. Bedelia's frosty attitude drops some, though she comes no closer. "Is he alright?"

If he had the capacity to answer that question, Will would say he was definitely alright— more than alright. Every part of him was thrumming and *alive,* the very room vibrating around him. The tick in his senses is gone. Any and all obstacles he might have had with them are simply erased as they expand in a single, overwhelming motion, flooding through the entirety of the station. He can feel all their sleep, their restlessness, hope and fear, all unfiltered and ready to be plucked at if he so chose to.

Perhaps Bedelia hadn't done all the work she'd intended, but the things that she had accomplished leave him absolutely breathless. The Ripper lingers close. "How are you feeling?"

Will can hear the concern, knows it's feigned, but can't give a damn while he's riding this high. He turns slightly toward the other man, able to see the running rivers of his satisfaction. Beyond him, there are bursts of color that course through the entirety of the station, out and in and looping between every waking body and Will, who's only a simple circuit in a chain of complex psychological reactions. He breathes in, static filling his lungs. He's half tempted to trap it there and let his ribs cradle this newfound ecstasy.

"Like," he says. "Someone just turned the lights on."

The Ripper's pride is only shown minutely through the slight upturn of his lips. He says nothing to express this, even though he must know Will can feel it. His attention doesn't stay on the Ripper for too long— it flies across the room, fast and pointed enough for Bedelia to look physically startled. "Everything up there, it was…you said it was—" He searches for the word as he shakily stands, half leaning on the chair. It's incredibly hard to collect his thoughts. "This is how you feel?"

The question is so curiously, so genuine it brings her to a stop. She clears her throat. "Not… exactly. No." Bedelia watches him carefully. "I wasn't able to pick it all apart. There are still pieces to untangle. I just didn't realize that you…" And she stops, lips thinning. A wall slams down against the invisible space he's been crowding, leaving her with a neat, private box of consciousness in the room. "It's different from what I've experienced."

And, the way she says it, her tone, her omitted words— she makes that sound like a bad thing. But it can't be, not when it feels like *this.* "When can we go again?" He asks. This time, even the Ripper is surprised by the eager tone he takes.

Bedelia prepares to slam those walls down further and behead the monstrous shape of Will's excitement, but the Ripper beats her to the punch. "Perhaps we should wait." The Ripper concedes. "There will be plenty of time tomorrow, won't there?"

The telepath's face finally shields up again. "I can make time. In the future, I'd appreciate more notice. Now—if you'd both allow me some time to clean up?"

Will's never been particularly good at reading expressions beyond emotions, but he this one is printed out in bold: *Please, kindly, fuck off.*

He decides that he likes seeing Bedelia unruffled. He likes it even better knowing that he's the one who ruffled her in the first place, forcing the woman back into a corner to preen and pluck at her imperfect feathers. She's been prowling around him for *weeks*— it's a wonderfully cruel thing now, that she unlocked the very thing that apparently gave Will the upper hand. With minimal effort, he pushes from the chair and tries his best to hide a growing smile as he heads to the door. The Ripper pauses before following, Will just able to hear his gentle *goodnight.*

The Ripper closes the door behind him, looks at Will, and *considers.* He's noticed from the few times the two have interacted that he does quite a bit of *considering.* He's not a telepath, but Will can imagine the cogs in his head constantly turning, scheming up something awful.

(and, despite himself, Will doesn't really care about all that terrible *considering* now; if *this* is what he gets for forgoing his own shaky morals, then he's happy to shove the rest out the window without complaint)

They fall to a standstill. Will can't bring himself to move, not with the constant push and pull of emotions. The Ripper seems to gravitate towards him. "An eventful night." He says. "Or perhaps morning. Time is often slippery. I wouldn't be surprised if the sun was starting to rise by now." His eyes flash over Will's form. The *considering* grows. "Would you like to look?"

Will's watched the sunrise plenty of times, now. Every other morning if he can help it— crawling out of bed and wrapping up in a coat, gloves and scarf. Sometimes he'll wake Peter up too, but most times he likes to go by himself. The morning air is always crisp, biting at his face and freezing up his throat. The sun rises slowly, warms him gently, a lover that he hadn't been allowed and now couldn't bear to part from.

Perhaps if he was still just as mindlessly giddy with this newfound feeling, Will would have said yes. But he doesn't, because this is still *the Ripper.* Despite everything— despite his coolness, his "kindness", his patience and soft tones, this is still a man who's murdered thousands for pleasure. It's a man who's happy with having blood on his hands and, with his current operations, seems to invite bloodshed wherever he goes.

Will's stomach turns. He looks down the corridor, feeling out the many beds beyond him. "I need to sleep," he says, not bothering to act like he has a stronger excuse. Disappointment twinges behind him, but the Ripper only lets out a quiet hum that might be agreement.

This is the cue for both of them to leave. Still, the Ripper remains as unmoved as Will. It stays like that for a few moments before he follows the path down to his sleeping quarters, still within earshot to hear the Rippers same, gentle: *Goodnight.*

He makes it to his bed, leaving Peter undisturbed, but he doesn't sleep. It's impossible to find any rest when his whole world is suddenly alive, brighter than it's ever been his whole fucking life. Without even moving he wanders the halls, feels out dreams he can't possess. He goes further still, out of the station into the chill of the night (where he briefly finds the Ripper, though avoids that chasm of emotion entirely).

As he lays there, he can't help but wonder if Alana or Jack had known it would be like this or if they'd been as ignorant as Bedelia and the Ripper claim. Ultimately, Will goes for the

latter. Whatever he'd done, whatever he's able to do— the M.C.P would have tapped into it long ago if they'd thought there was even a chance at enhancing his abilities.

He wonders what they might have done, had they known. Would his secluded life have been made more bearable with another meta-human there to guide him? Would it have made any difference at all?

When people finally begin to stir from sleep, Will decides that it's better that he's only been able to unlock this now. Even if it's relatively late in life and long overdue, he doesn't want to imagine what else they would have made him do.

He's pawing at more ideas of what he can do now, what Bedelia might ask of him, when Peter peers up at him from the side of the bed, hair mussed from sleep. His eyes are wide, owlish and confused. "Huh- Heard you leave last night." He says. "Okay?"

Will rolls over onto his side, sliding in closer to the other man. When he looks at Peter, he realizes how dry his eyes feel. Still, he doesn't feel tired. Things are even more vivid now, crashing and turning, sliding up against him with natural ease. "I'll explain over breakfast." Peter moves out of the way so he can hop out from his bunk.

In the cafeteria, Peter nearly chokes on his toast when Will goes over his meeting with the Ripper. "I thought you duh-didn't…." He struggles, eyebrows pinching and raising, a thousand little expressions passing over his face. For the first time, Will is able to pick each one out neatly, categorizing them in a split second. "You wanted to— to leave?"

"I did. I do. But for now— they're teaching me how to control this." his gloves hand curls on the table. "Bedelia, the telepath, she's making things easier."

Peter frowns. "Thought you didn't luh-like her, uh, either?"

"I don't," Will says firmly, because his ill will towards the woman hasn't just vanished, and he doesn't want Peter to even think it has. "I don't have to like her to work with her. Besides, I'm getting more out of it than her."

Peter looks up and toys with a napkin, ripping it into little pieces on his tray. His frown keeps growing. "If you're good, then it's—it's, uh good." A question lingers at the end, confusion swirling around. It's understandable. Will's flip-flopping on the subject hasn't been easy to follow, especially when he's remained pretty tight-lipped about most of his thoughts outside of just, *The Ripper is Bad.* "Just…" He lets out a heavy huff. "Duh-don't be there all the tuh-time, huh?"

Will makes a promise, only half-certain he'll be able to keep it.

He meets the Ripper in the middle. It's a surprising thing—he'd eaten his breakfast, chatted a bit with Peter, and then bounced off down towards Bedelia's quarters. The station's lively, though, so it's an effort to get through the crowd without shoving somebody. Mondays are

delivery days; there are packages of food to stock, weapons to put away, medical supplies to store. Everyone has somewhere to go, and they're all getting in his way.

"Excuse me," he says, slipping between two men carrying boxes. He bumps into another, earning a pointed look that deflates as soon as their eyes meet. Will carries on regardless, moving through as best as he can until the crowd suddenly seems to part for him.

Well, not for *him.* There's a moment of confusion and he feels the Ripper before he actually sees him. Now that his abilities are there, *really* there, he can catch the swell of power that seems to follow the man wherever he goes, the pulsating energy that flashes like a built-in warning sign for everyone else around him.

People skirt to the edges of the hall, allowing Will to finally see a flash of silver and red cable knit between moving bodies. He stops and waits for the Ripper to properly approach him. When he does, the Ripper offers him a smile, casual as ever. "I trust you slept well?" He asks. Never once do his eyes flicker towards the movement around them, his focus laser-sharp, demanding his attention. Not for the first time, Will finds himself uneasy.

"Yes," he says, knowing well that the bags under his eyes betray him. At least this time, the Ripper doesn't bother calling out his lie—not that Will gives him much time to do so, quickly jumping into more pressing matters. "Is Bedelia ready?"

The Ripper nods and turns slowly, asking silently for Will to walk with him. To avoid getting swallowed by the crowd again, he's forced to keep rather close to the other man (a detail he notes only because it feels like some backhanded power move on the Ripper's part, but Will could just be imagining things). "She would like to start outside from now on. I suppose she doesn't want to have to replace anything more than the mirror."

"Doesn't that compromise our position a little?" Will speeds up, now voluntarily sheltering close to the Ripper. "The M.C.P can track metahuman activity. Big bursts of energy don't just fly under the radar."

"That won't be a problem." The Ripper glances back at him, faint brows raising a bit. "Exchanging information? So soon?"

It sounds so close to a tease that Will should be stunned, but the Ripper's friendly cover is something he's growing more and more used to. He remains unfazed. "Only important things, the kinds that could have tanks rolling my way. But how do you have that *covered?"* Will asks. "Bedelia?" Sending out telepathic blocks for scanning like that didn't seem likely, but it wasn't totally out of the realm of possibility.

"A friend." The Ripper says cryptically as they round a dirt staircase. It's one of the secondary exits, leading up to a covered ground entrance. Will hasn't used it all that often, but he can manage that the main one is being flooded people bringing down supplies from the outside. The crowd here has thinned out, leaving only a few people darting this way or that. "He has helped us scramble signals when needed. He won't be there to spectate, but I can assure you that no one will be able to detect us."

Will lets out a noncommittal grunt, unsure of exactly how to take that. The Ripper's *friends* have all been people he hasn't exactly gotten along with, so he doesn't bother to ask after this one. They ascend in silence, Will blinking against the blinding white world as they surface. No new snow is falling, leaving the air bearably cold and the ground firm. The Ripper stands out stark against it all, that warning sign clearer than before. He's read about something like this before when boredom really hit him. *Red touch yellow, kill a fellow; Red touch black—*

He snorts, murmuring the thought: "Friend of Jack."

"Friend of who?" The Ripper asks curiously, slowing down a bit.

"Nothing, just— thinking." But Will does have to ask: "…Do you know Jack Crawford?"

"In a way. I know *of* him, but I've never had the pleasure of a personal confrontation." The idea of such a thing happening seems to amuse the Ripper. Will wonders how much pleasure he'd derive knowing that Jack had been picking apart his cases for years. "I understand he acted as your handler for some time?"

"Since I was eighteen," Will confirms. "Less of a handler, though. He was close, but never that."

"But you know him well?"

He shrugs. "Well enough. We weren't exactly friendly. I don't think you'd be able to call us *co-workers* either. It was what it was."

"So, he remained at an arms-length from you." The Ripper hums thoughtfully. "Because he thought of you as delicate? A neat little teacup—a piece fine china for him to gaze at behind a glass case?"

"I found that it's better not to try and analyze the people around you."

"I understand. The constant wash of emotions must have been enough for you to determine the inner machinations of their decision making, analysis aside. That is the purpose of emotions, after all: to design our actions for us." The Ripper slows again, looking around the forest with a serene expression. Will has stopped completely in his tracks. "I'm sure your Jack must have gone to great lengths to emphasize how his actions were informed by the wants and needs of the greater good. Even without knowing him, both of us must understand that that isn't quite true."

Will's brows twitch, expression pinching and he opens his mouth to dispute, to agree, to defend someone who has no right to be defended—

Bedelia sweeps up from the cover of trees, effectively stopping whatever jumbled mess that had threatened to come out of his mouth. "You're here— can we begin? I'd rather not spend too much time out in the cold."

He brushes past the Ripper, narrowly avoiding bumping into him. "Ready whenever you are."

Bedelia offers a curious glance between them, but nothing more. He doesn't even feel any psychological nudging, so the tiff is apparently irrelevant to her. She guides them both to a small clearing with a few fallen logs. The Ripper moves to sit down on one of them, settling in to watch once again. It's easier to ignore him outside, at least— there's enough of the world buzzing around that the Ripper's energy becomes an afterthought. Bedelia is a stronger force to focus on now.

"What's in the lesson plan for today?" Will asks. "More untangling?"

The question strikes some discomfort, bitter to taste, but it's gone before he can really chase after it. "We've done enough of that. Now that you can see clearly, it's about building up your walls and strengthening your focus. These things go hand in hand. They'll act as foundations for what's next." She moves forward, removing her gloves. "I'm going to have you try to block me out as best as you can."

He steps to meet her, extending a hand. "Was that what happened to the mirror? Unfocused energy?"

"Yes. Now—"

"But I didn't touch it."

The air prickles with annoyance. Bedelia presents her hand, refusing to meet his eyes. "You didn't have to. Releasing the mental tension caused a telekinetic backlash. We're lucky that its random target was only the vanity."

He's no stranger to imagining scenarios, picking out situations, or creating futures that hadn't happened. What if he'd killed Bedelia in that unintentional strike? He'd have no teacher, or at least not one for some time. What if he'd hurt the Ripper? What if he'd killed him? What then, for his army of refugees? What then for his big plans?

Bedelia's cuts through his musing. "To learn about focus, you need to be *here.* Not up there."

He murmurs an apology, dashing the ideas away. He can collect them again later, when there's not a nosy telepath right in front of him. Closing his eyes, Will brings back up the image of his little wall (and it looks a little older now, worn and chipping, likely a symptom of knowing how weak it was now in the presence of someone who can break through).

Beyond him, he feels Bedelia rallying herself like a battering ram, knitting the floating parts of herself into one immovable force. "This might be painful."

She sighs, and then proceeds to tear him apart over and over and *over and over.*

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> “We fought because he killed someone on my behalf.”
>
> “Usually, that would warrant gratitude,” The Ripper tilts his head just so. “But you didn’t want him to.”
>
> “I don’t need anyone bloodying their hands for me.”
>
> The barb doesn’t go so unnoticed, but the Ripper does nothing more than blink at him. If he wasn’t so unreadable, (if Will didn’t refuse to read him, more like it) he would guess The Ripper was rather unimpressed with the verbal lash. “He speaks highly of you. You may see his loyalty to you as abhorrent— he sees them as acts of admiration. Love, even.”

Chapter Notes

> I almost divided this chapter up into two parts, but I decided no-- I'll give both in one go as a neat treat

Margot had never considered a relationship as a viable means of escape. That didn’t mean she had never tried, but any and all flings she might have had were dashed as soon as they were found out— they passed through her life as bribes and sudden, curious disappearances, all of which chasing after led to dead ends. People were disposable when there was enough money involved.

(“Margot, really,” Mason had said to her, wagging his finger and clucking his tongue. “People are even less than that *when you’ve got the kind of means that we do.” He’d paused, and smiled, dipping a delicate paper square into his martini. “Well, that* I *do.”)*

She’d given up on that route eventually, long before she’d met Alana. Even when things began to work, she knew that it wasn’t really getting away. After all, she had no money, no means of living that wouldn’t be interrupted by Mason. Only two things saved Alana from being cut out of her life.

The first is the fact she worked for the government (because even he was aware that going after someone in a position like hers wasn’t the smartest move, no matter what kind of wealth their father had left him with). He’d done an immeasurable amount of digging on her, and

had emerged out from his dark little hole with a fanatical interest in meta-humans. The few times that he and Alana interacted, he was always sure to stick his nose into the details of her work, much to both of their displeasure.

The second is the fact that she's a woman.

Mason had laughed, *laughed,* when he'd first found out about the wedding. He'd kept her from trying to figure out a loophole to the inheritance of the Verger business through a baby, but now? She was doing it on her own. *Willingly*. It'd been a subject of poking and prodding for months, the only reprieve coming when Alana asked her to move in.

That need to produce her own heir still exists, despite her happiness with Alana. It'll probably never leave her, will continue to be a looming shadow over her life— just like her brother.

All talk of children and heirs has been put on the back burner for some time, though. There are more pressing matters right now that need Margot's attention. For example: Alana pacing through the kitchen, circling the counter again and again. Margot watches this display from the couch. "Watching your phone isn't going to make it ring."

"The last time he called he said they had leads."

"The last time he called was this morning." After a moment of thought, she sets aside what work she'd been trying to do to put her full focus on her wife. "Come here. Sit with me."

Alana stops to lean over the counter, hovering over her remarkably silent phone. She swipes it off of the marble and plops down on the couch. She's lacked her usual grace for the past several weeks, though admittedly Margot's seen her worse. She's grateful that Alana's anxiety is higher than her fear at this point.

They don't know if the asset is alive, but Alana's convinced herself of that much. *There'd be bodies,* she'd reasoned. *He doesn't kill without showing it off.*

She doesn't know how true that may be, but she trusts Alana's instinct more in this area than her own. Besides, even suggesting anything other than the asset's survival seems to send her into fits— apparently, Crawford hasn't ruled it out as a possibility just yet.

Alana curls in close, fixing right to her side naturally. Margot places a gentle arm around her, fingers stroking over her shoulder, playing with her hair in small, comforting gestures. The other woman stares out into the living room, eyes unseeing. Margot knows well enough the kinds of thoughts that are circling in her head. They remain like that, coiled around each other, a position that they've become terribly used to. It's interrupted briefly by the cellphone that's locked in Alana's fist buzzing, the woman practically jumping to unlock it. Her face deflates as she reads the screen— Margot manages to catch a glimpse of Lounds' name running across a headline. She squeezes Alana's shoulder. "You don't have to read it."

"I *know.* I know." Alana lets out a noise of frustration, finally releasing the phone so she can rub at her temple. "She's touting this like it's some kind of victory for her, going everywhere she can just to say I told you so, and for what? What does that do for *anyone?"* She asks the

air (Margot's learned now that most of her questions don't require answers— just getting the words out into the open is enough). "We're not even bothering to put out new statements to combat her."

"Which just goes to show how useless even looking at it is." Margot reaches out, forcing Alana to lay the phone down on the cushion. "You need to sleep."

"If Jack calls…." She starts, clearly leaving Margot room to dash her argument.

"I'll wake you up if he does." Margot shifts so she can look at the other woman. "You're not going to be much help if you can't keep your eyes open."

Alana heaves a sigh but complies, getting to her feet. Margot remains on the couch with the phone, watching patiently as she begins to drag herself away. When she reaches the door, Alana pauses to look back. "The second it rings—"

Margot waves a hand, shooing her out of the room with a look. She continues to wait, unmoving until she hears the slight creak of the stairs, the softest sound of a door closing. And continues to wait, just to see if that door will open again— which it thankfully doesn't.

If Alana even gets an hour of sleep, Margot will be thankful. She's never been much of a caregiver, and having to even act slightly like one has tested their marriage (not to the point of breaking, no, but she has snapped here and there).

She hesitates before plucking up Alana's phone, swiping to see the Lounds article. There's no use in *really* reading it, especially not when it's likely just full of the same buzzer-words and phrases that Lounds has been using since this all began, so Margot just skims through. There's definitely gloating, along with a few nice mentions of her loyal base and jabs at the protestors who've been building their own momentum in the meantime.

While others have been effectively riled by the government keeping such operations so secretive, some have rallied around the issue of meta-human protection (because, apparently, killing American citizens without much cause besides faulty genetics was very upsetting).

They don't understand that we're in an evolutionary war. Lounds says of her opposing movement. *These people are ticking timebombs, and to describe them as anything is underestimating them to a dangerous degree. The U.S government has been classifying them as genetic terrorists for years— now that we have the same knowledge why shouldn't the American public do the same?*

Margot rolls her eyes, skimming through the rest before setting the phone aside again and pads over to the kitchen. She grabs the wine she'd opened the other night, pouring herself a glass of what remains.

Their home is coming along fine— there are still a few boxes lying around full of smaller decorations and details that neither can be bothered to put up just yet. The place itself isn't very small, but it's smaller than what she's used to. Not that she can complain, since she'd done most of the decision making when it came to the move. It wasn't because Alana didn't want to, but more because she didn't have much time and didn't have too many particulars

about where they lived. It was a cozy spot, farther from the nearest town but not quite in the middle of nowhere. Margot had really just been drawn in by the fact that a ranch was close to the property.

She's never asked to ride any of the horses— just looked at them from the fence, offering sugar cubes and carrots. It's nice just to be around them without the fear of them being taken away. Slowly, painfully, her accustomed apathy towards any living thing is falling away. It's a dangerous thing for her to allow, foolish even, but it makes existing just a little easier in the end. Margot takes a heavy sip. She looks out to the backyard, the field beyond where she can just see the fencepost of the ranch. The light's fading, slowly but surely, sliding away from her.

The universe holds its breath just for a moment, allowing her the pleasure of mindless lingering. Inevitably, Margot's the one to force it to exhale, breaking it to wonder whether or not to open another bottle.

She can't help but flinch when a phone starts buzzing— instinctively, she looks to the couch even when said buzzing is coming from her own pocket. Margot pulls it out with no real rush. Her expression does not change, though she stares at the number for some time. Lets it continue to ring, just because she wants to force him to wait, just because she wants to keep this bubble of peace for a few seconds longer. Still, she answers. "It's late."

"What? No greeting? No niceties? I'm hurt, Margot— wounded, really. You were raised better than that."

Margot decides that yes, definitely, she's going to open another bottle. "What do you want?"

"Can't I just call? That's what people do, you know, they call each other. I miss the sound of your voice. Really, I really do— there's this obvious space here now, this Margot-shaped hole I just can't seem to fill. A little itch I can't scratch. But I know you're all nice and domestic in Sappho right now, so I'll just keep scratching. How is she, by the way? The missus?"

No— she takes that back. The liquor cabinet holds better solutions to this than a bottle. She presses the phone against her shoulder, grabbing a glass and pouring out a bit of scotch. "We're fine."

"Just fine? Looks like she could be better. They say any press is good press, but geez*. The public's wild for her and her little team, but I'm sure you know that. That Lounds sure is a firecracker about this, throwing all kinds of words around. Traitor—I've seen a lot of that around. Liar too, but that doesn't hold as much weight.* Traitor*, though…wow. It can really rile people up. Very unpatriotic kind of thing to label someone. Being in that kind of light can sure be dangerous for a person."* He pauses, breathing static on the line. *"I'm sure you know that too."*

Margot grips the glass. Her jaw clenches. "Mason."

"Politics are funny like that though, right? Running around, making big decisions, it really puts people in some bad positions. But, what do I know? I've never been too invested— two wings on the same bird I say. And god, sorry, I'm just a chatterbox today, I haven't even

answered your question! And…damn, what was that again?" In the beyond, there's a muffled shriek of a pig. *"Could you ask it again for me, Margot?"*

She looks out the window again. The last dredges of sun have sunk into the beyond, leaving only the dim, cold kitchen lights above.

"What," she presses the phone tighter against her ear. "Do you want?"

(even if she can't see him, she knows he's smiling)

"I need an itty bitty favor."

The exercises are exhausting, to say the very least, and radically different from the kinds he'd been through before. The scientists who'd poked and prodded him when he was young had just been trying to breach the surface of his abilities, how they worked and in what ways they could be used. They had only asked them to use them the ways he knew he could— Bedelia, one the other hand, is forcing him into areas of unfamiliarity that are distinctly uncomfortable.

He's suddenly become thankful that the telepath continues to ignore the Ripper's urgency for progress. If this is them going slow, he's not sure if he'd be able to handle the expedited version.

Speaking of— the Ripper hasn't missed a single session since they began. Each time he sits at the edge of the clearing, not quite looming but still very much there. His attention has expired a little since the first few, though, and he's opted to bring out a book to pass the time. Today, he's brought a little journal. Will's not sure if he's scratching down notes, but from the way his pencil moves, it looks like he's drawing.

Bedelia stands across from him, wearing a heavy coat and scarf. "You're pulling in emotions, but you also need to *push* them. I've felt that blind nudging, but you have to learn to direct it. Try influencing my emotions."

Will nods and compresses the winding tendrils of himself into one sharp spike. He mulls over what he wants to express. He's tried this once before with others, but it had ultimately flopped as an experiment— those who'd been working with him had just written it off as something he wasn't capable of. Now, he stretches out with ease and strikes.

He sinks deeper, further, and Bedelia's brows knit together. For a moment, she seems to shrink, shoving her suddenly trembling hands into her pockets. He's pushed out quickly enough, brushed aside as she rights herself. She's only allowed herself to be a guinea pig because she can still overthrow his attempts. "Anxiety is poignant, but it's not complex. Joy, sorrow, rage— primary emotions. They may appear rather basic, but they're built upon

memories, conceptions. You need to tap into those." She braces and gestures for him to proceed.

It's a different method, then— one that doesn't just involve prodding at weak points. Will exhales harshly, forming and reforming, trying to pinpoint the parts that correlate. He's not sure if he can make a real grab at where Bedelia's anger lies. Like The Ripper, she appears rather calm and collected, only allowing small flares of annoyance to peek through. And joy —he doesn't really have any desire to make Bedelia *happy,* even involuntarily. So, sadness then.

He seeks it out, winds his way through the finely structured walls of her mind (which he's able to see clearly now, at least, instead of the muddled illusions he'd been able to gather before their training had started). Even as he presses, Bedelia remains unmoved by his efforts —she doesn't even twitch as he tries to dig. Will frowns, closing his eyes so that he can see that tender spot. He can taste it—salt and melancholy, stinging his eyes and making his throat flex uncomfortably.

"You're letting it bleed through again," Bedelia says. She speaks aloud, but he can hear her words reverberate in the metaphysical space between them.

"Give me a minute."

His hands curl into fists, nails biting into his palms. He can *see* it. He knows how he should be able to pluck at those flimsy strings, but just can't quite get to them. Despite his best efforts, his fingers clumsily just fiddle with them. They won't snap or bend to his will, and the more he tries, the more he feels the echo of his intentions wash back on him. Memories crop up with this tide, and he sees Alana there just in the corner of his mind's eye, tainted red —

"You won't have a minute."

"She's right. This is only meant to disorient your target," the Ripper provides rather unhelpfully.

Will grits his teeth. "I'm *trying."*

The source is there, somewhere. He can't *see* her memories like this, but there's a sense of them. They're not even guarded against him—they're free to touch, but he just can't grasp them like he wants to, like he should be *able* to. Instead, he just gets closer to Alana's shadow, dripping and broken; she's spilling out on all his senses, suffocating his senses and makes his struggle to have Bedelia feel anything turn on its head, forcing him to claw against the sudden crippling self-driven onslaught.

When Bedelia speaks, he can hear the frown in her voice. "We should take a break." The Ripper makes a small sound of agreement from the side, though doesn't engage.

Will shakes his head, pushing past his own visions. Alana isn't actually *there,* and the things he sees aren't *real,* and he isn't that *sad* about them. *"No.* I can do this, just…." He lets out a

frustrated sound. His eyes are shut so tight that he already feels a headache forming in the space between his brows.

He can see it there in Bedelia's mind. She's still keeping it wide open for him, a ball of energy that's fluctuating with memories he can't read, with ideas he can't hear. The energy he can feel though. He stretches all his senses forward and readjusts himself in her head. Instead of attacking he tries to *connect.* Tapping in there, now, he can see-feel-taste-hear—

It snaps back at him in a single explosive moment. He jerks away as if he's been slapped, unshed tear welling up in his eyes and sticking to his lashes. When he opens his eyes, he looks down to the snow, refusing to admit defeat yet unwilling to try again.

He doesn't know if she's able to read it or sense it— either way, she silently understands. "Your walls are still weak."

"Forts," he corrects a little uselessly (a border wasn't enough; his imaginings have taken the form of heavy defense). "And I've been working on them."

"Evidently."

He turns away from her, glaring out into the trees. "It isn't exactly easy."

"I never said that it was."

His iciness is enough to have her sigh— something she does quite a lot now. "We'll reconvene in twenty-five minutes. I'm going back inside to warm up. Hannibal?"

The Ripper remains. "Later," he says, dismissive but still soft.

She nods to him, brushing his side as she goes. It's a brief thing, one that Will had best ignore, but the sight still pricks at him just a little. He still has no clue as to what Bedelia's connection to the Ripper is or how she managed to get herself in his good graces. She's useful, yes, but it feels more personal than that. He doesn't go after any answers. Will wants no part in whatever twisted sort of relationship they've cultivated and is happy to feel Bedelia's presence retreat back underground. Unfortunately, it leaves a rather big gap in the clearing.

It isn't the first time he's been left along with the Ripper—still, it's no less awkward. He shuffles for a minute, kicks at the snow, and wonders if he should take a walk, or sit, or even go back down into the station too. But he remains, breathing in the chilled afternoon air.

Oftentimes, the Ripper will just continue to sit and either scribble or read, unbothered, and also thankfully never in the mood to bother Will. He looks to the tree-line again; maybe a walk would do him good—

"The speed of your learning is per my insistence." The Ripper finally says. "I had thought that, with the right amount of pushing, you would fall back onto natural defenses."

Will's fury doesn't quite meet the other man but it certainly swamps the air around him. "I'm always happy to disappoint."

The Ripper offers a slight shrug. “Progress is still progress.”

Dipping into the pool of the Ripper’s emotions is something he’s actively avoided doing. He isn’t even sure if he can do it outside of catching slight, intangible bursts; there remains a constant buzz about the Ripper, clouded but not quite invisible. It makes Will wary and gives him all the more reason not to go seeking out the others sickly web of conscious connections. But still, in the moment, he’s tempted. Just to see whether or not this patience is feigned, whether or not he’s hiding contempt for Will’s inadequacies.

He brushes snow off of a nearby stump and sits. “I guess.”

“I can ask that she takes it a step slower with you.”

With you. Like Bedelia’s trained others, like he’s just so particularly *slow* to take to his abilities. He’d never been called exceptional, but the phrasing still stings his pride. Will shakes his head. “It’s fine.” He says, anger skirting the edges of his tone. The Ripper says nothing about this, only goes back to his sketches. Will huffs, rubbing the palms of his ungloved hands over his thighs. There’s a sudden burst of heat in his chest. “Why did you make Matthew Brown a scout?”

For once, the Ripper looks a little surprised. “He offered his services.” He sets his pencil down.

“And you just let him go? Just like that.”

“Does this have something to do with your personal relationship?”

Will sneers. “I’d hardly call it a *relationship.”* Denial of their connection is pointless, but he’d still prefer to keep the man at more than just a comfortable distance from his person, if possible.

“Matthew seems to think of you as friends. If he’s wrong—?”

He’s quick to cut in: “We’re not friends.”

And *fuck,* the interest is undeniable. The Ripper remains quiet, waiting on him to elaborate. He even tips his head a little when more than a few seconds pass without an answer. He lets out a soft, disappointed sound when Will continues to silently refuse. “He did tell me of your fight. It was a brief explanation, more to excuse his injuries than to divulge any real, private details.” He says. “Our resources are stretched thin and his gifts appeared useful. I believe they work well with the type of assignments I’ve given him.”

“Did he also tell you how he almost deserted the last station he was at? How he was about to steal supplies before they finally got caught?” Other questions sit with him, like *Did he tell you he saw you before? Does he worship you too?*

“He did not.” The Ripper closes the sketchbook, his full attention on Will. “Do you believe I should be worried?”

Silence again, this time offering Will the chance to make a claim against The Ripper. It would be easy enough to discredit Matthew to the highest degree—Will has every right to after everything the man had pulled. But insults feel childish and trying to strip him of everything feels…wrong, in a way. He doesn't necessarily like Matthew, but despite everything, he doesn't feel that he really *hates* him either. Will frowns. "No. He'll remain loyal as long as he has a cause. His place is good right now. Valuable. If he's not threatened, he won't abandon it." He pauses, thoughtful. "We fought because he killed someone on my behalf."

"Usually, that would warrant gratitude," The Ripper tilts his head just so. "But you didn't want him to."

"I don't need anyone bloodying their hands for me."

The barb doesn't go so unnoticed, but the Ripper does nothing more than blink at him. If he wasn't so unreadable, (if Will didn't refuse to read him, more like it) he would guess The Ripper was rather unimpressed with the verbal lash. "He speaks highly of you. You may see his loyalty to you as abhorrent— he sees them as acts of admiration. Love, even."

At that, Will sneers, lip curling up and nose wrinkling. "You *would* say that." He doesn't beat his disgust, but he hopes it's still palpable to the other man. "What do you dedicate your violence to? The thrill?"

Very rarely does he actually bring up the Ripper's rather infamous killings. Mostly he just doesn't want to have to remind himself of the kind of man he's now working with any more than he has to. At least with the M.C.P, he could relieve himself of most responsibility. Here? *Now?* He's willingly betraying and endangering countless others by his own volition (a slightly forced volition, true, but it wasn't as though he'd been tortured into agreeing). He doesn't know exactly how things will end, but he has some idea of where he's pushed the route of the world.

He doesn't regret speaking up. The Ripper's expression twitches and a flash of insult whips hard against his shoulders. "So, they were shown to you."

Will nods firmly. To what he's referring to needs no clarification. Mass graves, artistic installations of death, unreal and bloody, curated by the Ripper himself. Human and meta-human alike.

"And that was what you took from it? Only saturated violence?" The Ripper's gaze narrows. "Even now?"

For the first time, it feels as though the man in front of him is…budding. Not quite opening, but the buzzing fades just slightly, leaving him more tender. Movable. Ready and ripe for Will to feed off of. It's a clumsy sort of feeling that's shoved into the world, lacking the grace that The Ripper usually has in all things; he can't control the psychic energy, can't force his thoughts around as Will or Bedelia, but that doesn't mean he can't offer them up. It stays between them: a reverent sacrifice.

It's a swirling, inky thing, but it's not monstrous. They're only bundled emotions, hastily knit together to provide wordless explanations, rationalizations. Instinct tells him to take. Will

reels himself in completely, caged inside his own body; a headache is a small price to pay for his hasty actions.

“That’s what I saw.” Not senseless. *Saturated.*

There’s a part that they don’t talk about, that Will refuses to acknowledge. It sits with him, though, in that moment— the thought of that violence. Of bodies, flayed, caught in sick metamorphosis. Of meat.

Matthew, distant and still in awe. *He ate them.*

They sit there for a while, Will refusing to speak, The Ripper continuing to wait for him to do so. He has to wonder whether the other man can manipulate the energy in some capacity. It wouldn’t be that far of a stretch, seeing as how the stare he gives seem to burrow through Will—like he can see past all the mindless thoughts, right into the base of his skull, the backs of his eyes, the darker pits that he himself cannot grasp.

The Ripper stands, sketchbook tucked under his arm. “Bedelia should be returning shortly— I think I might have some tea myself, while the kettle’s still warm.” The pencil is tucked away into his pocket. “I’ll ask that she take things a little easier. Report to me when you’ve finished with her?” He asks, like it’s just a suggestion like those eyes aren’t compelling him to nod silently in response.

Once he’s sure the Ripper’s out of sight, Will sags and runs a hand through his hair and considers just how much *bigger* the world has gotten since he agreed.

Bedelia comes back through the tree-line after ten minutes later, cheeks flushed. Her expression is tight and he wordlessly stands, ready to start again. She brushes up against his mind, unbidden, apparently searching for something that she’d been too afraid to take from The Ripper himself. Will rolls his eyes and presses back none too gently. “Whatever he said…”

She remains at the edge of the clearing. Cool. Untouchable. “He only told me to ease up a bit. And he’s right— I haven’t been taking your lack of exposure into account.” At his sour look, she said: “It isn’t a failure on either of our parts.”

Will gets that. He does. But there’s still a swarming, nasty feeling in his chest, born from that same *lack of exposure.* He’d always done what had been asked of him without fail, without trial. Before, any production on his part had always been enough. “So.” His tone is clipped. “Forts.”

“Forts.” She echoes back, though instead of moving back into her spot as she should, she instead faces him entirely. A few things pass through, unreadable, though her ice has daggered in a way that speaks to fear rather than annoyance. “Hannibal is…interested in you.”

“I’m very aware of that already.”

“He is *interested,* but he doesn’t take well to being pushed.”

Will pauses, quietly reassessing Bedelia. “I’m being careful.”

Bedelia’s gaze thins. Unimpressed yet again. “Those who play with fire are often the ones who’ve never been burned.”

“Guess it’s just my lack of exposure.” Bedelia inhales sharply, though Will brings up a hand to stop any incoming scolding. “I can tread with more caution, if that’s needed. I’ll do what he asks me to. But I can’t force myself into whatever docile role you’ve taken on— I’m not here just to appease him.”

“You don’t think you have a stake in this?”

“I help you, you help me, then I go.” He says, even though he knows, he *knows,* it’s not that simple. “I’m not interested in the kind of war that the Ripper wants.”

Bedelia’s lips thin into a tense line. She sweeps past him and his stump. “The charm of being new is going to wear off faster than you think. Your grace days are few and far between now.”

Will smiles, a nasty, hollow thing. “I’ll make the very best of them, then.”

Finally, she’s back to her rightful place in their makeshift clearing. She extends her hands, beckoning him forwards. No more time to waste on petty fights. There is work to be done.

He goes for the better option, coming to stand in front of Bedelia. She doesn’t strike him as before, though it’s no less gentle. Only slow enough to give him time to try and place a shield against her attacks, focus on the *where* rather than just the *what.*

They try at emotions as well, and he desperately clutches at sadness this time. It’s even more elusive than anger, though he suspects that’s just because whatever might actually bring Bedelia any sense of sorrow has long since dulled.

When Bedelia’s satisfied with his work and the chill is getting a little too unbearable, they start making their way back. Bedelia walks particularly slow and, just as they’re a few feet out from the entrance, she places a hand on his shoulder. Will looks to her, aggravation thrumming because he doesn’t like to be touched, especially not by *her*, but it fizzles out. Her impassiveness is still there, but it’s stonier. “You don’t have to be seasoned to know that Hannibal does very little out of kindness,” Bedelia says, just above a whisper. “Your value means nothing when it comes to maintaining your autonomy.”

There’s no threat— not from her, not to Will. Only a piece of experience, passed down from one pawn to another.

Not so untouchable, then.

He shrugs away from her touch, though does solemnly nod. No thanks are needed between them. They descend, staggered, but still unfortunately connected.

They part ways once they reach the station, and somehow, Will wishes it was on a sourer note. It’s not smart to go picking fights, but he can’t help himself. These days, he’s more

agitated than not— it's even bled over into his time with Peter. Not that Peter's a ray of sunshine either. He's particularly distraught when Will meets with him in their bunk, huffing and puffing with his feet up on the bed and his arms wrapped around his knees. Will twinges in the shared stress that dogpiles his own. "What happened?"

Peter shakes his head, his frown deepening. "Won't let me." He snaps, then angrier: *"Won't luh-let me."* He rocks once, but stops, anger flushing anew.

Will moves to sit down on the very edge of the bunk, keeping his distance. If Peter wants to reach for him, then he will— he knows better than to go touching without provocation. "Who won't let you?" The story will come bit by bit, slow but sure. Here, with this, Will has plenty of patience.

"The…" He struggles for a moment, lips twitching before he spits out: "Chuh— Chiyoh."

Annoyance of his own plucks his chest. Chiyoh hasn't invaded his life as Bedelia has, but her presence around the station is…unnerving. He knows he's not the only one who feels that way. "What happened, Peter?" Will asks again, gentler this time.

Peter closes his eyes, scratching at his jaw. Slowly, his legs unfold, feet finding the floor. "I miss Kevin. Just left him— left him there, duh-didn't have time to go…go guh-get him. Didn't mean to, you nuh-know I didn't. I didn't." He rocks forward, gripping the edge of the mattress.

"There wasn't any time, no. You couldn't have thought to get him. Even if you had, you couldn't know whether or not they'd even let you take him." Will reassures and smooths over Peter's mind gently. Even if Bedelia's practice isn't getting him to where the Ripper wants, it's helped to pinpoint things better; with proper focus, the emotions finally form some meaning. With talks of the missing mouse and Peter's continued and stinging loss— "You tried to bring another pet down here," Will frowns. "But Chiyoh didn't let you?" He can imagine that; Peter, hands cupped around a furry little companion, trying to walk back down into the station only to be greeted with the Ripper's secret eye and a sharp denial. "Did she say why?"

Peter gives a twitchy shrug. "Animals aren't uh-ah-allowed."

Will comforts his friend to the best of his ability and doesn't say anything about understanding a rule like that. It isn't like they have their own space anymore, and he knows not everyone will take well to an animal running around. He doesn't feel particularly angry with Chiyoh now that he understands she'd only been doing her job as the unofficial peacekeeper. Still. Peter's mood just continues to sour, and he wishes that Chiyoh had just let him do what he liked.

He doesn't go to report the rest of his lesson. When he sees Bedelia again, she projects a number of thinly veiled insults his way.

A storm rolls in and postpones their lessons for the next few days. Most shipments are halted too, with only crates of canned food able to make it through— that's the only time the door to the surface is opened. Hardly anyone moves through the halls either. Heaters are placed in the main rooms, everywhere else left to fend off the bitter frost that hangs in the air. In an oddly comforting turn of events, Chiyoh and a small band of other meta-humans deliver food to each of the living quarters morning and night.

On the second day, when everyone seems to settle into the knowledge that the storm isn't just a front for some kind of raid, Peter tries to teach Will how to play slapjack. The deck of cards is procured through a neighbor— a small, wrinkled man, but kindly and who hands it over when asked, without demanding anything in turn.

Peter's surprisingly agile with the cards, so long as he tilts his head up. He has Will remove the two Jokers from the deck for him. "Nuh-never played?" He asks in disbelief. "Really?"

Will shrugs. "Never got around to it." There hadn't been much time for games.

"Loved— loved playing cards, uh-always played 'em before—" He gestures twitchily to his scar. His hair's grown out some, through the shape of it still sticks out despite the wild strands. Will touches at his own jaw unconsciously. He hadn't exactly been clean-shaven before, but he's definitely closer to a beard than simple scruff. His hairs grown out too, curls tickling the back of his neck. He frowns, looking away as he places a card down blindly in front of Will, who takes it into the rest of his growing deck. "Didn't get, uh, wasn't cuh-cards after that."

He hums, making a neat pile. Peter's able to look down at his own half of the deck if he keeps his hands still. "They used to train me with cards for a while, to see if I had telepathic abilities." He places a card down. "We had two, three trials before they gave up on it."

Peter does the same. "Never gave— gave *me* cards." He huffs again.

A few more land. Queen. Ace. Three of Hearts. Then—

Peter's head jerks to the side and he slams his hand down on the stack, hard enough to shake the springs. *Jack.* His smile is almost unbearably bright. Will presses another card down.

"Did they ever put you in contact with other meta-humans before the Burrow?"

"Duh-Don't think so." He squints. "Just me 'n the animals. 'S good like that." A card down. "You muh-miss your handler?"

Will frowns. It takes him a moment to fill the stack. "Why would I?"

Peter shrugs. "Was nice to you. Seemed nice." He glances at him, brow furrowed, and an apology bleeds through. Finally, he seems to understand that picking at this weeping wound of his isn't going anywhere. "My worker wuh-wasn't nice like her. Always said I wuh-was bad, but I— never, I never duh-did bad things."

“People like to abuse their authority,” he says. “It gives them a sense of power. Control. He doesn’t hold much over you anymore, though.”

Peter blinks, eyes wide and owlish before a smile creeps on his face. It’s not a revelation, only a reassurance. “Yuh-You’re right.” He nods. “You’re right.”

Will slides a Jack into the pile. Peter’s slow enough that when he does strike, his hand only smacks the top of Wills. He howls in defeat, rocking back and leaning on the post of the bed. Will just smugly shuffles his now much thicker deck.

He waits till more supplies start coming in, till the door isn’t basically barricaded against the snow, before sneaking out with Peter in tow.

“Wuh-We supposed to be out, uh, here?” Peter asks.

“No.” Will answers.

It’s still freezing out; the snow has piled up impressively, leaving the two of them to have to lift their feet up and over just to get through— in a few spots, it’s piled as high as their knees. Will doesn’t mind because he’s on a bit of a mission. Peter doesn’t mind because he just loves the fresh air. When he whistles, songbirds carry his tune, their feathers brushing snow off of branches as they can follow the pair along.

He takes them farther than even he’s been—he can still feel the slight tittering of minds in the station, but it grows fainter as they go. His plan doesn’t involve leaving, but there’s the urge to explore that he just can’t shake. Best to do it now, when there’s no watchful eye (at least, not one that he’s aware of).

When the trees start to thin and the snow becomes less dense, Will stops. “Any rabbits around here?”

Peter tilts his head to either side, his own senses reaching out into the world. They pass over Will, smooth as water over stone, instead seeking out the blips of life around them. A russet head pops up in the distance and hops over, curious but driven. Peter has never said anything about liking the control he has over animals, but Will’s aware that he’s not so opposed to using it. Not that he often has to— most seem happy to be around him regardless.

Peter kneels down to greet it, taking off one of his gloves so he can pass a hand through its thick fur.

“Think you’ll be able to hide it in your coat?”

Understanding flashes over Peter’s face and he smiles, already cradling the rabbit in his arms. Will helps him with his jacket, opening the chest wide so that Peter can tuck it inside. There’s a bit of squirming, but the rabbit remains subdued. “Chiyoh—”

Will zips back up his coat. “She doesn’t have to know.”

Both of them understand she'll find out, but the spark of joy from Peter, the swell that arrives in Will's chest from feeling it, is enough to suspend reality.

They move unnoticed in the clamor for new supplies. On the way, Peter names the rabbit Bobby.

The next time he and Bedelia go to the clearing, the Ripper does not join the audience. Somehow, his absence is more alarming than his presence. They don't stay out for long, the cold nipping at both of them terribly. The telepath says nothing to him, makes no mention of the Ripper. It brings him no comfort.

An hour after they've finished, Will treks down the halls to the Ripper's quarters. Curiosity brings him there more than fear, though Bedelia's words ring in his ear as he comes to stand in front of the heavy curtains separating him from the room. But it's not just that warning echoing in his head— from inside, he can hear the low murmur of voices. Two of them, low and soft. He hesitates before knocking on the frame of the doorway.

A moment later, and the curtain is moved aside by the Ripper himself. He looks down at Will, amber eyes flashing. "Here to report your progress, I hope?"

Will nods wordlessly, peering directly over his shoulder. The lighting is dim, but he can still make out the boxy shape of another figure, long and lean and dark.

"You've come at an opportune time. This meeting is long overdue." The Ripper graciously moves out of the way, one arm still pushing the curtain aside as he gestures Will in. "This is the man I spoke of, our friend in the woods.

"Friend?" The man inside echoes with a hint of amusement. "I never knew you thought of me like that, Hannibal." He turns to Will, smiling politely in a way that doesn't quite meet his eyes. They are dark, beetlelike, though not glassy in a way that speaks to unawareness. He's *very* aware of everything, gaze flashing over Will in an instant, every move measured as he steps forward and extends a hand. "Tobias Budge."

He looks down at the naked palm. Will has his gloves, but his instincts tell him it's better not to touch regardless.

Tobias doesn't look displeased or surprised, just smoothly brings it back down to his side. "I've heard the stories— it's different seeing you in the flesh."

"The real thing is usually lackluster," Will offers dryly. "You're the one giving us a blind spot?"

Tobias nods and peers curiously at the Ripper. "I see you've talked about me. All good things, I hope."

When he goes to look too, the Ripper has moved from the doorway to his desk, plucking up a small, aromatic cup. "A passing mention. There was a concern for safety— I only explained

that you had the means to ensure it." He takes a sip, casual, but not relaxed.

"Ah. Concerned that we'll be found out, Mr. Graham?"

"The M.C.P is probably stretching every resource they have right now. They have eyes and ears everywhere— it's possible you can't muffle all of us here."

If Tobias takes offense to that, he doesn't show it. Everything about him is rather cool, only a few things rippling to the surface, all of it rather fleeting and not worth investigating. Tobias steps to the side, moving to pick up a coat from the back of one of the cushy chairs. He looks to the Ripper, almost amused. "We haven't been found out yet. Eventual capture isn't in the plan, is it, Hannibal?"

The Ripper doesn't deign him with a true response, merely humming politely from the edge of his cup.

"In any case, there's nothing to worry about. My abilities allow me to interfere directly with wavelengths. Rather than making a distinct spot where nothing can pass through, I'm simply manipulating them around us so that they wash through." Tobias explains. He shrugs his coat on, fixing the collar. "You're perfectly safe. Hannibal would have it no other way."

He offers a slight tip of his head and goes quietly out of the room, Will watching him the whole way. The report he gives to The Ripper is nothing particularly special; he's gotten a better hold of how he's meant to be directing emotion, though the feedback loop is yet to be properly contained. At the very least, he can start the process without hurting himself quite as much.

The Ripper appears pleased with that, at least, finishing off his tea. "I've no doubt that you will come to grips with your new power, but in the meantime, I believe it would be best to begin your next form of training."

Will frowns. "You just said that I needed to take my work with Bedelia *slower.* I don't think adding more to what I'm already doing will help with that."

"I'm speaking of a different kind. The gifts you've been granted are formidable, and adjusting to using them outside of touch is important, but you will not always be granted the opportunity to employ them against others. Other telepaths who can block psionic attacks exist. There may even be those who could block an attack from your touch— or even those who know of it and are adequately prepared to handle it." The Ripper sets his cup down. "When I freed you and your compatriots, I had made sure that no part of me could be exposed to you. We're both aware of how that went."

"So, you're suggesting— what? Combat training?" Will asks, unwilling to revisit *exactly* how it had gone.

The Ripper nods. "I believe it would be more than beneficial. Unless you already have training?"

Will deadpans. “Sure, yeah, because they’d give the guy they have under lock and key how the means of getting *out.”*

“I try not to underestimate their intelligence, but they were using you as a weapon, were they not? It might well have been something that was at least considered.”

He shrugs, knowing that it’s not totally out of the realm of possibility. If things had gone well with the Hobbs case, Jack might’ve required him to go through some soft field training. They’d never intended for him to be a soldier, but that didn’t mean the plan wouldn’t have changed.

The Ripper, on the other hand, seems intent on making him just that. “Will I be getting that training from you, then?” He asks, only mildly surprised when the man chuffs out a laugh.

“No, no. I’m afraid I’m far too busy to do more than look over your progress.”

“So, who? Tobias?”

It’s not some great leap in logic. Tobias had been talking with the Ripper, and now the Ripper is talking to him about training. Still, it feels like the suggestion is somehow offensive considering the way the Ripper looks at him. Will raises a brow. “Not Tobias, then.”

“I’m afraid his plate is nearly as full as mine. Chiyoh will be the one to guide you through your physical training. She’s an excellent teacher— I believe you may enjoy her company more than Bedelias.”

He hums his agreement. “She’s able to stay out of my head, so, yeah. We’ll get along just fine.” Etiquette in conversations isn’t needed for him to understand that the topic of Tobias is one he’s deciding to politely skip over. There’s something more than, deeper and pressing. If the man were at more than just an arms-length away from Will’s own operations, it’d be none of his business. But— “It’s not an issue of trust, is it?”

“Trust in Tobias?” The Ripper tilts his head just so, questioning, waiting for confirmation before carrying on. “I trust in his abilities. I trust that our interests align just enough for him to stay on the route I have set for us. Trust in his person, though...I hardly ever evaluate allies by things as fickle as measures of faith.”

A lonely, suspicious world to live in. A reality that’s well deserved. “What a tight-knit circle you’ve got. Gives me the warm and fuzzies.”

“You may poke fun, but I don’t believe we’re so very different in that regard. I doubt that the foundation of most of your own relationships was anything light or particularly kind. I even suspect that you have trouble offering much trust to anyone— even those you might consider close to you.”

He fidgets a little, growing more and more uncomfortable with the fact that their conversations keep ending up in sensitive areas somehow. “You told me you wanted my trust in the beginning. Now you’re just admitting it’s impossible to gain.”

“Not impossible.” The Ripper shakes his head. “Only difficult. Personally, I maintain the philosophy that it must be earned rather than given out freely. Where is the reward if one needn’t work for the result?”

“And what about my end of things? If you get mine, then I should get yours. Rules of reciprocation, all that.”

He leans back against the desk “You don’t want my trust. If you began vying for it, it would be more suspect than not. I do think that says something.” Before Will can press the issue further, The Ripper carries on: “Being offered *my* trust shouldn’t be your focus, of course. Bedelia will have your afternoons, but Chiyoh will be taking you in the morning. She’s a rather early riser. You should do your best not to keep her waiting.”

Will can’t help but press: “So you’re going to make it just as difficult to get?”

The Ripper humors him with a polite smile. “Only if you aren’t worthy of it.”

The specifics of his training were glossed over briefly; he’ll be staying underground, in one of the larger ‘common areas’ where he’s seen others sparring. Apparently, he isn’t the only one being given some physical training. Will’s not surprised. What’s the point of having an army if they don’t even know how to fight?

When he’s dismissed, he heads straight for their quarters. His pace isn’t exactly hurried, but it’s not quite easy either, Will bumping through the few throngs of people taking up space in the halls. Most of his concern is unwarranted; the source of it is completely fine, hopping around rather happily on the dirt floor by their bunk.

Three children are crouched down low, watching with wide eyes. Peter is sitting on the ground among them, practically vibrating with excitement. Not wanting to interrupt, Will remains several feet away, leaning his shoulder against the closest empty bunk.

“She’s so pretty,” a girl coos, the pupils of her cat-like eyes blown wide. “What’s her name?”

“He,” Peter corrects gently. “And huh-he’s Bobby.”

A smaller boy, just a little over being a toddler, giggles as the rabbit pauses to clean his face, little paws flicking his ears forward. “Bunny Bobby.”

“Got to be gentle wuh-with— with him, okay? Real, real gentle. Like this.” Peter strokes a hand down Bobby’s back. The children close in to do the same, small hands petting the rabbit's side or back or head. Bobby himself remains rather placid throughout the endeavor, though Will suspects that has something to do with Peter overriding the creature's prey instincts.

Will smiles faintly, crossing his arms over his chest. His eyes drift off to the side, noticing then the few adults hovering close by. Parents, probably. Maybe even just guardians— assuming all of the kids have two living parents is a stretch considering their predicament. The smiles fades as he considers all of them, crowded down on the floor. The thought of

them becoming child soldiers, pushed into the fray, has his stomach doing all kinds of flip-flops.

(and, for the first time in a while, Abigail comes to mind; blood spewing out of her neck, eyes wide, pupils turned to pinpricks as she'd stared up at him, then beyond him entirely)

There's nothing he can do for them, as much as he might want to. At this point, almost everyone is aware that the Ripper is only providing temporary safety; they'll be asked to return his 'kindness' sometime. It seems that everyone's simply holding their breath and clutching onto the faintest kinds of normalcy till then. Will can't blame them, really—he's doing the same thing, standing there and watching, unwilling to interrupt and scatter the peace.

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